

There's No Mistletoe Above Our Heads But I'll Kiss You Anyway

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There's No Mistletoe Above Our Heads But I'll Kiss You Anyway

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Summary

"I'd love for you to come George, but you do realize that I'm not out, right?"

Ah, there it is. The fact that Clay isn't out until his family. A minor detail.

George, before fighting better judgement, says, "we could just pretend we're not dating?"

Clay has the grand idea to take George home to meet his parents, but there's one teeny-tiny detail he didn't tell them about:

He's gay, and George is his boyfriend.

(Or, Clay and George have to pretend they haven't been dating for nearly two years, and George is a really terrible liar.)

Notes

(edit) DISCLAIMER!!! I published this when I was super early in the fandom, so I didn't really understand the importance of using names like Sapnap and Quackity instead of their actual names. When I'm not swamped with school, I'm going to go back and fix all of that! Also, I wish I could do the same with Dream but using his real name vs Dream was a plot point in the previous work in this series so there isn't much I can do about that,, anyhoo happy reading!

Hello-hello! It's me again :)

!!this is the sequel to my other book! I suggest you read that first if you want everything to make sense, but it isn't necessarily crucial in order to understand the plot of this!!

This will be loosely based off of the movie The Happiest Season, you should go check it out (even though it isn't Christmas anymore, so depressing). As for the title, it's a lyric from the girl in red song "Two Queens in a King Sized Bed."

Anyways, enjoy! Expect me to finish this at the speed of an insomniac with absolutely no social life.

Chapter 1

George

Sometimes, life really fucked George over.

Okay, *sometimes* is a bit of an understatement. As a struggling post-graduate trying to keep his head above water in New York City off of minimum wage, life fucked him over more often than not.

But he could count on one thing, and one thing only.

Clay.

Some days when he'd come home from work he'd find Clay in the kitchen with a glass of apple juice and a hug waiting for him there. Other days, when he'd get home before Clay, but Clay would still be there in his own inadvertent way; in the hoodie he left strewn on the couch, in the distant scent of his cologne and the way he smelled without it lingered in the walls. It made George feel safe. It made this small, kind of cramped apartment home.

Oh yeah, that's the other thing. They lived together.

Once George returned from his abroad semester in Britain, he did end up moving into his separate apartment, but Clay found his own way of making George's apartment some of his own, too. Even when they were buried in college essays and exams, they still found each other in the midst of it, found ways to be around each other.

And then, they finished strong the next year, wrapping up their fourth year of college. They moved onto their separate jobs, shitty minimum-wage jobs as they waited for bigger companies to notice them. (Preferably Mojang, obviously.)

In other words, it had been nearly two years since shit went down with the little yellow notebook and the dramatic love confessions. They hadn't had much opportunity for such *dramatic* events in their relationship since then, whether that was good or not. But, they hadn't broken up once, and they never *really* fought to the point where everyone around them was pissed off at how irritatingly perfect they were for each other to the point where Clay could simply walk into a room and George would be able to tell if he was tired or sad or happy.

So, here they were, two twenty-four-year-olds in love in New York like it was some sappy coming of age romcom.

But really, George could always count on Clay. Clay was his rock. He always managed to get George to crack a smile no matter how tired and irritable he was. They loved each other more than they loved anything else and it showed.

Yet there was one teeny-tiny thing. Just *one* thing.

George's parents were still... uncooperative. That was a *huge* understatement, actually, but there's no need to get into it now.

And Clay, on the other hand... he wasn't out to his parents *at all*.

Now, George didn't think of this as a threat to their relationship as he was perfectly content keeping

a friendly distance from Clay's family for as long as he needed him to, but very soon, this would become a big, very big problem.

"Hey, Georgie."

"Mmf."

There was a laugh at that. "Geooooorge," Clay singsongs, and George reaches out his hand blindly to swat at where he knew Clay was laying in bed next to him.

"How is it that after six years of knowing you," George says into his pillow, "you *always* wake up first to terrorize me?"

George can tell that Clay shrugged at that, "eh, you know. It's cute seeing you all sleepy and angry."

"What did you want from me, again?" George was slurring his words, and he hadn't even bothered to open his eyes. It was a weekend, which meant he didn't have work, which meant he didn't have to be *awake*.

"It's almost noon," Clay nearly whines as he lazily tugged at George's wrist, "and it snowed a lot last night, so I thought you might want to go on a walk, maybe stop in the book store?"

George hums, "that sounds nice, actually. Let's do that." But instead of sitting up or at least opening his eyes, George sunk deeper into the blankets and tugged Clay closer to him by the torso. Clay willingly scoots closer, but not without prodding his side a little.

"Up up, George. Time to get up," Clay harps, poking his back and sides enough that George groaned, rolled over so that his head laid on Clay's lap, and blinked his eyes awake.

"I'm awake," he says unceremoniously, but he can't help but smile up at the sight of his boyfriend, golden hair illuminated in a halo of morning sunshine and bright eyes taking the same glow.

"Wow," Clay muses, "it's a miracle." Clay leans forward and presses a kiss to George's lips, a quick but sweet gesture as they gazed at each other like the love-struck idiots they were.

"Did you know that once you've been friends with someone for seven consistent years, you'll probably be friends for life?" George says after a few moments of comfortable silence. He had picked up Clay's hand in both of his own, turning it over backwards and forwards, a habit of his that Clay had grown quite fond of.

"That makes sense," Clay murmurs as he leans his head back against the headboard. "Once you've known someone for that long and stuck with them, you'll probably stick with them forever."

"Yeah... I guess that means you have one more year to escape me," George replies, little devilish grin growing as Clay scowled down at him.

"Seriously, dude, you just took a shit on that moment," Clay sighs playfully, but he was already moving George's head off his lap so he could properly lay down next to him, and then roll onto him. George laughed he could feel Clay's chuckle against his neck and the accompanying, little kisses that were placed along there. He shivered.

"I thought we were... taking a walk?" George's tone of voice turned teasing as his fingers lazily raked up and down Clay's bare back.

"Five minutes," Clay mumbles against his neck between kisses.

(It was a lot longer than five minutes.)

George and Clay took walks around New York often, hand-in-hand (and in this case, mitten-in-mitten). Especially when it was winter, with the snow falling and the holiday spirit buzzing in the atmosphere. After last year, where the two spent Christmas in New York once again, George could tell that the holiday was growing on Clay.

“Hey, I actually wanted to talk to you about something,” Clay says as they walk along their usual loop in Central Park. George had a bag tucked under his arm with a few purchased records in it as they made it a game to see how much they could make their record collection grow by the end of the year. They still had a few weeks left to see.

“Oh, alright,” George responds without a beat, swinging their entwined hands. “What’s up?” George played dumb and acted as if he hadn’t noticed how Clay had been stressed the past few days and checking his phone more than normal. That was the thing about living with someone in a one-bedroom apartment; you notice everything.

“Well...” Clay exhales and watches his foggy breath, “my family is having a big reunion for Christmas for the first time since I was probably... what, ten?”

George gives Clay’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “Wow,” he marvels, knowing that Clay hadn’t had a Christmas with any of his family members since he went off to college as once Clay’s parents divorced, Christmas just didn’t feel right. So, it was quite the shock to hear that all of them would be back together. “Wait, so like... your mom *and* your dad?”

“Yup,” Clay mutters, and George didn’t have to look over to hear the resentment in his voice. “It’s going to be an absolute train wreck, and we get to be the onlookers.” He gave a sad laugh at that, “it’s going to be my mom, her boyfriend, my dad and his wife, my sisters, my sister’s husband, their kids, my mom’s boyfriend’s kids...” Clay grits his teeth, “it’s going to be a full, full house.”

George tuts, “well, I wish you the best of luck.” He turns to look at Clay this time. “Are you okay? You’ve seemed stressed, honestly...”

“Yeah, don’t worry!” Clay replies quickly, too quickly, and when George raises a brow at him, he scratches the back of his neck. “Okay, I’m okay-ish.” Clay pauses before he finally admits, “I’m really nervous.”

George frowns a little. Clay didn’t get nervous easily, but this made sense. “I could come with you,” he blurts out suddenly before he could stop himself. His logic was simple: be there for Clay, and be the rock Clay has always been for him.

Clay looked to him in surprise and honestly, George felt the same way. “You, come with me?” Clay responds as if questioning if he heard him correctly.

“Yeah,” George says weakly. He clears his throat, “of course it’s fine if you don’t want me to, or there’s no room or it’s too short notice-”

But Clay was breaking out into a smile, and he stopped in the middle of their path winding through the snow-dusted trees of Central Park and lunged forward to wrap his arms around George, hoist him up, and spin him around in his arms. George knew Clay wouldn’t drop him, he never did, but he still shrieked loudly enough to make some poor, passing people look over at them in confusion. Some things really didn’t change.

“Clay, Clay, you’re gonna make me drop the records!” George tries to say but he was laughing so

much that the words were lost. But Clay seemed to understand anyway as he spun George to a stop and set him down on his feet once again.

“What was that for?” George asks a little breathlessly. Clay grins down at him,

“You’re just... you’re so sweet, George. I’m lucky to have you.”

It had been two years. Two *fucking* years but this idiot, this beautiful blonde idiot only had to say a few words for George to get flustered. It still worked like a charm.

“Touché, you big dork.”

And just like that, they resumed their walk as well as their previous conversation.

“I’d love for you to come George, but you do realize that I’m not out, right?”

Ah, there it is. The fact that Clay isn’t out until his family. A minor detail.

George, before fighting better judgement, says, “we could just pretend we’re not dating?”

“Just pretend that you’re not- are you guys fucking kidding me?” Nick’s voice rang through the kitchen. Nick was sitting on a stool while George was sitting on the counter and holding a warm mug of hot chocolate between his hands. “You two can’t go five seconds without eye-fucking each other. Like, seriously, get a *room*.”

Clay, who was sitting beside Nick, swats at him, but the guy had a point. Hiding their relationship as well as his sexuality from his own family during an already-chaotic reunion sounded like a *horrible* idea, but if that was what he had to do to have George with him, so be it.

“We’ll be fine,” George insists. They could do this. They could resist the urges to hold and kiss each other in the presence of other people for a few weeks. How hard could it be?

“The only problem will be trying to get George to act like a convincingly straight man,” Nick admits, to which Clay just hums in agreement. George narrows his eyes at the two of them who seemed to be sharing some kind of unspoken understanding regarding this subject.

“What do you- I can be a convincing straight man if I want to be,” George says with a *hmph* as he sets his empty mug down. For an instant, Clay and Nick look at each other before suddenly bursting into the most boisterous laughter George had heard in a while. “Hey!” he attempts to shout over the nearly-screaming laughter, “guys, it’s not *that* funny, I can just talk about football and weight-lifting or some shit!”

Even as the underlying worry for Clay hung in the atmosphere of George’s mind, he enjoyed the night they all spent together watching a horror movie before going on to play Minecraft as usual, and just like old times, they fell asleep on the couch with blankets strewn here and there, Clay and George tangled together like two peas in a pod. George knew he would do everything in his power to keep Clay calm and happy for the holidays.

And, as he lifted his packed luggage into the trunk of Clay’s well-used car, he read a single message across his screen from Nick that just said *good luck, man*.

It felt extremely foreshadowing in a way that George didn’t find settling.

Oh yeah, and good luck pretending to be straight. Tell Clay to send me a video.

Yeah, that wasn't settling at all. This was going to be one hell of a trip.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clay

If there was one thing Clay couldn't do in the world, it was keeping secrets from George.

He could keep secrets from his own mother easily, and even Nick. But George? George was his kryptonite.

He already felt nervous just sitting on this plane, where George was strewn across his lap dead asleep. At first, they agreed to act as if they weren't dating starting the moment they walked into the airport, but obviously, they gave up on that endeavor as George was already cuddling into him in his sleep.

See, Clay had one big-ass secret that he wasn't telling George:

In the front pocket of his backpack hidden behind packages of gum and old store receipts was a small, black, velvet box.

He remembered showing it to Nick the previous day, once George had fallen asleep on the couch during their movie. He had taken Nick to the other room as he just needed to tell *someone*, anyone as he felt he would go crazy if he didn't.

"Hold on," Nick had said as he looked from the box cradled in Clay's hands up to his face and down to the box. "You're going to-"

Clay flips open the box to reveal a simple silver ring with small sapphires embedded along the inside of it. He sighs a little as he turns the little band over in his hands. How could such a small piece of jewelry hold so much weight? "Yeah," he whispers, "I'm gonna ask him to marry me."

"Holy shit," Nick had replied, which pretty much summed up Clay's emotions at the moment.

Holy shit, Clay thought to himself as he carded his hand through George's hair. He thought it was a fair move to ask George to marry him as they already lived together, they had known each other for six years and dated for nearly two of them. He hoped George felt the same way, but even if he didn't they'd work it out. They always did.

The other thing he wasn't going to tell his parents was the fact that he invested his time into being a YouTube star and was currently housing fifteen *million* subscribers. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

"Why not tell them?" George had asked as they sat in the back seat of the taxi that took them from the airport and to the deathtrap of Clay's mom's house in Florida. Apparently, she had moved from her previous cozy cottage-ish house George had seen when he visited a few years back. But, it turns out Clay didn't even need to answer George's question as not a second later, the taxi rolled up to the front of a very, very, *very* large house. Clay watched as George's jaw dropped. Apparently, fitting everyone wouldn't be a problem.

“Shit, man,” George marvels as he practically presses his face to the glass of the window, “why didn’t you tell me your family is... I don’t know, *loaded*?”

Clay shrugs as he pays the taxi driver while George was distracted (they always argued over who paid for car rides and Subway passes and coffees to the point where they made it a competition of who could pull out their money the fastest). And, he got out from the car, tugged their suitcases from the back, and lead a stunned George up to the front doorstep. The door was tall, and wide enough for two people to walk through at once; there seemed to be two floors and likely a basement, and the whole house was build with a red brick that made it seem very charming, and *very* rich-person-ish.

“Clay, this house costs more than my entire *life*,” George whispers as he tugs on his arm as they stood outside. Florida was muggy and too hot, even in mid-December, so they had abandoned their scarves and big coats from New York and substituted them for jeans and light shirts. “I don’t have anything fancy to wear. Actually, the fanciest thing I have to wear is a pair of jeans that are a slightly darker shade of blue than normal ones.”

Clay turned to George, about to do what he would normally do, which would be to muse up his hair and press a little kiss to the worried crease between his brows, but he had to restrain as he reminded himself that kissing his friend *wasn’t* very heterosexual in his parents’ eyes.

“Don’t worry, we can go clothes shopping together. It will be fun. And you can borrow some of my clothes from when I was a kid, those should fit you.”

George glares at him, clearly about to start a war about the constant teasing over his height, but not a second later, the front door swung open to reveal Clay’s mother.

“Clay!” she exclaims, reaching forward and hugging him tight. Clay had to admit, he’d missed her, but her perfume *really* did smell like rich-people, and she *looked* like a rich person with her white jeans and pale sweater. George looked so pale with worry that Clay feared he would combust.

“George, it’s so good to see you again,” his mother is quick to say as she moves from crushing Clay to death with a hug to crushing George to death with a hug. “Here, come inside, both of you! Don’t worry about the luggage, we can get Dan to death with that later- everyone is in the kitchen, come say hi!” George visibly gulped as soon as Clay’s mom turned around, and Clay looked over at George to see that he was getting paler and paler. Wow. George really *did* suck at keeping secrets, didn’t he?

“George, you look like you’re about to throw up,” Clay whispers behind his mom’s back as she herds the two of them towards the kitchen. It was remarkable how it took more than twenty steps to get from the front door to the kitchen when it took about four strides to get from the front door to their bedroom in their apartment.

“Really? Is it that obvious?” George whispers back. Clay’s expression softens.

“Just... try to relax, okay? Be yourself.” He cringes, “but... not *too* much of yourself.”

“I know, I know.” George sighs a little and Clay suddenly felt an overwhelming wave of guilt as he realized that he was the reason why George was being put through so much stress. He had to hide his own sexuality after having to hide it for most of his life.

But, Clay wasn’t given the chance to apologize as they were thrown into the lion’s den; or, in other words, the kitchen filled with Clay’s relatives.

“Big C!” someone whoops in a voice that *definitely* didn’t fit any of the judgmental-looking, well-dressed people gathered around the kitchen counter. Clay looks about enough to notice the culprit: Alex, with his beanie and hoodie and jeans and loud, loud voice. “Eyyy, man, how’s NYC been, huh?”

Clay finds himself pulled into a half-hug by Alex, who he had been friends with for years and years. “Pretty good,” Clay says cordially, but he had to admit that he was relieved to find Alex here, even if there really was no reason for him to be here. Clay becomes aware of George, who was practically hiding behind him and peeking over his shoulder to see who this loud person his boyfriend was talking to was. “George, this is Alex. He’s my… well, he’s actually not related to me, so I don’t know why he’s here.”

“Come on, man,” Alex says as he gives George a slap on the back instead of the handshakes George had probably become accustomed to when he came into the house, “you know I missed you so much. Maybe the fact that the champagne here *slaps* is a small part of it, but hey, we don’t have to get into it.”

George grins. “Nice to meet you, Alex. I’m Clay’s b- friend, friend. Yeah. We’ve been friends. Since I moved to New York. Uh.”

Clay elbows him hard enough in the gut that George coughs, and Alex raises a brow at the two of them. For maybe the first time in his life, Nick was right about something. George pretending to be straight was going to be a *big* problem.

“We should all play something together sometime,” Clay offers to quickly divert the subject topic, “George, Alex likes to play Minecraft, too.”

“That’s right,” Alex confirms as he takes a hearty swig from the champagne glass in his hands. “I’m an epic gamer and I’m definitely better than Clay.”

George grins some more. “That makes two of us.”

Despite being the butt of their jokes, Clay felt a sense of warmth that George and his childhood friend were getting along as if they had known each other for years. It was especially amusing how the two were arguing over who was taller, and as soon as Clay simply walked over to them and very obviously looked down from his ridiculous height, the two decided to gang up on him until their conversation was broken by a collection of people.

“Clay!” Before he knew it, he was being enveloped in his sister, Tori, and her bone-crushing hugs that she had definitely inherited from their mother. “Wow, you’ve gotten even taller,” Tori marvels, and Clay can sense George rolling his eyes next to him.

“Don’t tell him that, it will go straight to his head,” George mutters, and Clay nudges him playfully.

“Aw, is someone jealous?”

“You little-”

“*You’re* the little one here, George.”

Then there was an awkward silence as oops, they went into their old-married-couple banter as Nick called it and forgotten that Clay’s sister was standing there, smiling that wide, fake smile. “And you are?” she asked George in a tone that sounded so snide that Clay didn’t know if it was intentional or not.

“George,” he answers, holding out his hand to shake, “it’s nice to meet you, I’m Clay’s roommate.”

Tori looked down at his hand for a second, then back up to him with narrowed eyes. Clay hoped she could see the daggers he was glaring at her. What was her *deal*? It was almost as if she could see right through George and his lies. She probably could...

“Alex, how did you get in here?” Tori asks as she whirls from George to Alex, whose wide, trademark grin faded into a straight line.

“The front door,” Alex answers in a sort of *duh* tone. George snorts behind his hand but immediately quiets once Tori shoots him a look. “What, did you think I crawled through the window, *mamacita*?”

Clay spat on his drank at that and George snickered some more, but his snickering turned into full laughter once he saw the look of absolute *disgust* on Tori’s face. “Alex, for the last time,” she says in an eerily calm voice, “*don’t* call me that.”

“What? *Mamacita*?” Alex’s grin was growing and growing and George was laughing steadily harder. “Don’t be such a downer, Tori. You know your mom loves me, and Clay does too, so I’m very welcome in this house.”

“This is fake news,” Clay mutters.

Even with Alex and his wild personality that was bound to distract Tori, she still seemed to be focusing in on George like a hunter tracking its prey. Somehow, she had sniffed out George’s nervousness, and she was onto him like a shark. It showed, and Clay knew that George could tell.

Yet, after being reunited with Anna, who was more welcoming than Tori by a long, *long* shot, and his father who he hadn’t seen in years and his mom’s boyfriend, Dan, whom he had never met, the tension in the air seemed to ease a little bit.

Well, it did until they decided to give George a house tour.

They showed George around the entire three floors of the house, each carry out its spick-and-span appearance and expensive-looking furniture that made Clay afraid to sit on anything in fear that it would break, or his very presence would contaminate it.

The hallways were so long that Clay felt that they would stretch on forever, and upon looking at the photographs of his mother and her boyfriend, memories he hadn’t been there to make, he was glad his father hadn’t tagged along for this house tour.

Everything was fine and completely civil as Alex tagged along, who was more than slightly drunk yet still acting nearly identical to his usual sober self. Anna, on the other hand, made a game with George of who could guess the correct prices of the furniture. Tori wasn’t very impressed with that one.

“There’s no way that one piece-of-shit table is two thousand dollars,” Clay scoffs as he looks over to George and Anna, who grinned siamese, evil grins. These two were unstoppable.

“Oh Clay,” George sighs, “you really don’t understand, do you?”

“What a pity,” Anna adds, ignoring her mother’s monologue about the pieces of art in the office, “such potential wasted.”

“You guys are- I should have *never* introduced you two,” Clay starts as he huffs and turns around

to continue following his mother down the hall.

“We’re just too powerful, George,” Anna whispers to George, who grins at her.

“He’s intimidated. Awh, Clay, are you *scared* of us?”

“He is,” Alex pipes in, voice too-loud and *very* drunk. “Little baby Clay, wah wah, little pissbaby-”

“Oh my *God*,” Clay groans, “what did I do to deserve such hatred?”

“Alright, you load of *children*,” Tori interrupts, “Mom is showing us Clay’s room. George, don’t you want to see?”

Clay feels a small chill run down his spine at the cool, accusatory spike to Tori’s tone. Any previous doubts that she was onto George were very clearly confirmed.

“Uh, sure,” George answers awkwardly, and he shoots Clay a look that could only be translated as one thing: *what the fuck?!*

“Clay has the best room, I think,” Clay’s mom says in content as she waves to the walls filled with photographs of Clay at Disney World as a little kid, Clay with big headphones on way too bulky for his eight-year-old head as he seemed to be playing his first game of Minecraft. “Oh, and here’s Clay and Sofia.. you guys were so cute together, why did you break up?”

Clay gulps. Sofia, his ex from high school, a relationship that started beginning of senior year and dragged on for far longer than it should’ve. George showed no signs of surprise, thankfully, as he already knew well about Clay’s relationship history. “We uh, kinda just grew apart,” Clay lies. It was true that they grew apart, but they grew apart *because* Clay was starting to realize that kissing Sofia just felt *wrong*. A kind of wrong that never so much as crossed his mind when he kissed George.

But his mom didn’t need to know that.

“That’s a shame,” his mom murmurs as she sets a picture back on the wall, one with Clay beaming, and Sofia, who was beautiful and tall and blonde, dressed in a long, silky black dress to match Clay’s suit for prom. Sofia looked like the picture-perfect model girlfriend.

“I’ve had a girlfriend,” George blurts, his wide eyes rounded as if he was shocked by his own words. In an instant, all the attention in the room was focused on him.

“Have you?” Tori adds, but it wasn’t like she was interested. She was *amused*, mocking.

“Yup.” Clay could practically see him sweating. “Many girlfriends. Yeah. They um. Were also tall. And blonde.”

“All of them?” Tori quips.

“Yes,” George starts, “I mean, no. No, one of them was... she had...” he looks at the floor, “purple-ish hair. Not naturally, though. Aha. That would be ridiculous.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Clay’s mom said with the tension so, so visible within her voice. She cleared her throat as a clear indication that they should change the subject, but it seemed that Tori had either failed to pick up on this, or flat-out ignored it.

“Do you have a girlfriend right now, George?”

Alex takes a loud sip of his champagne and- how did he get *another* one of those?

“Uh,” George stammers, looking to Clay for help who just gave him a blank stare that he hoped could be understood as *George, just say no. Please, just say no.* “Ye- no. Nope. Single. Very single. Yeah.”

“That’s an L,” Alex quips as he gives George’s shoulder a bump, “it’s fine, bro. We all knew. You give major virgin vibes.”

Clay and Anna start laughing so hard that Anna was snorting and Clay was wheezing while Tori and Clay’s mom watched with equally horrified expressions.

“You, that’s not-” George’s face flushed darker and darker and Alex had the damn audacity to *laugh*, along with Clay and Anna who were squeaking and roaring with laughter. “Alex, you little *bitch-*”

“Let’s go downstairs!” Clay’s mom practically shouts over them, and in an instant, a wave of silence washes over them. If George wasn’t sweating before, he certainly was now.

After more emotionally-draining small talk and his daily dosage of disappointing his family, Clay finally got to lead George down to the basement, where he would apparently be sleeping. He told his mom it would be fine for George to sleep in his room with him, but his mom just laughed and said “*don’t be silly, Clay, I’m not making two grown boys share a bed.*”

Well, *lead* George is a bit of an understatement as in reality, he practically dragged the poor guy away from a terrifying-looking conversation with his mom’s boyfriend about football. George seemed to have been trying to lower his voice a few octaves in a weak attempt to imitate a heterosexual male. Keyword: weak.

But, once the two scurried off to the small bedroom in the basement, they practically slammed the door shut before they broke into full-body laughter.

“George, how did you get *away* with that? How are you still alive?” Clay wheezed. George wiped tears from his eyes,

“I, I don’t know- Tori fucking *hates* me, she definitely knows something’s up, and don’t even get me started on Alex!”

George slumps back to sit on the bed, and Clay followed him as in an instant he went about entwining their hands. He felt the familiar spark ignite in his veins as he brushed his thumb along the back of George’s hand. It hadn’t been long since they begun with this not-dating thing, but it was already painful to have George be right there but not be able to hold his hand, or even stand too close to him without it being suspicious. It was so *hard* because he was sick of feeling like he had to hide the one person he loved most in the world.

“Yeah, it was pretty funny when he called you a virgin,” Clay adds, hand giving George’s a squeeze. George scowls at him, yet he still manages to squeeze Clay’s hand back,

“You should be more offended by that than me,” he responds with a breathy little laugh that completely caught Clay off guard. Now it was his turn for his face to heat up.

“You’re so lucky Nick isn’t here,” Clay replies, “he’d be having a field day right now.”

George laughs, and it was only now that Clay realized how they’d naturally shifted closer and closer until Clay could see the golden specks in George’s eyes, and the flicker of warmth to them if

the light caught just right.

“I hate not being able to kiss you,” George mutters against Clay’s lips.

“So why not get it all out of your system?” Clay mutters back, his hands already finding the small of George’s back to gently tug him closer. George laughs, a small exhale he could feel against his lips.

“That’s the first good idea you’ve had all day.”

And just before they could, the split second before their lips could *finally* meet, before Clay could hold onto George and kiss him because no one was there to stop and judge him, a split second later, there was.

The instant they heard the click of the door, George practically leapt away from Clay and Clay did the same, rushing to kneel on the floor and act as if he had been helping George unpack his suitcase. George, on the other hand, opened the dresser across the room. And, once the door swung open, they realized that it was just Clay’s mom bringing down extra blankets for George to have for sleeping.

“You two look a little flushed,” she says with her brows creased with worry, “is it too warm down here?”

“It’s fine, Mom, don’t worry,” Clay insists, quick to respond before George would make up some terrible excuse.

George looked ready to crawl into the dresser and never come out.

“By the way, boys, we’re going to a nice dinner, so dress up, alright? George, do you need anything to borrow?”

“He’s fine,” Clay says in a strong voice, “he can borrow something of mine.” Clay loved his mom, but the one thing he wouldn’t stand for was when she talked down on people, even in such subtle ways. Especially George.

“Alright, then. Clay, won’t you come upstairs? I have a little surprise for you.”

And so, fully expecting to find a new pair of shoes or a new book or *something*, Clay followed her back up the stairs. It was funny as as soon as he opened the door from the basement, sound immediately found its way to his ears. It seemed that he and George had found a quieter, softer haven down there.

But Clay would discover very quickly that what was waiting for him wasn’t a new pair of shoes, but rather a person that he knew very, very well. Too well, in fact, for his own liking.

As if on command, someone stepped out from within the crowd of people she was shrouded in.

Her hair was half-pinned back just like it had been in high school, and though it had been years, *years* since then, she looked exactly the same; maybe her hair was a little longer, but it was still blonde with that slight curl to it.

“Suh-Sofia?” Clay asks dumbly. She just smiles that bright, forced smile he always saw his mother and Tori wear. George never smiled like that. He always *smiled*.

“Hi, Clay,” she says with a laugh buried in her voice.

Clay felt like the memories hit him like a *truck*. Memories of making himself kiss her when he felt like he should, of her complaining that he spent so much time with his friends online playing Minecraft, of him complaining that she wanted too much from him.

But here she was, smiling at him, looking just like she did when they were together, and Clay looked to his mother, who had a dangerous twinkle in her eyes. Like she had something planned.

And then he looked back at George, who had adopted the pained smile his family had forced him to wear, but he looked at Clay with a gaze he knew meant *it's fine*. Clay believed him, but Clay didn't share these feelings because with his ex-girlfriend and (hopefully) future fiancé staring at each other and his supposedly homophobic sister practically breathing on George's neck, he realized one thing:

This holiday was going to be a fucking circus.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter was a bit dry and kind of shittily written (I'm literally running on a few hours of sleep and a Monster Energy) but I just wanted to get this out there for the sake of the plot before I can ~spice~ things up with some drama and fluff :D

I hope you guys enjoyed this, and as always, thank you so much for your support!

<3 <3 <3

Chapter 3

George

They had only been there three hours, *three hours* and George had already managed to make Clay's mother weary of him, Tori hate him, and get exiled to sleep in the basement.

Not to mention the fact that he had had many close calls with outing his and Clay's relationship. He was 90% certain that Alex and Anna had already put the pieces, which he didn't necessarily mind as they seemed like the only bearable people in this household aside from Clay. The real sucker punch was that Alex didn't even *live* here, so really, all he had was Clay and Anna.

But, here he stood, behind Clay with the most forced smile he'd ever worn perhaps in his life as he looked at the beautiful girl that used to hold Clay's heart in her hands.

It wasn't like she was evil or anything, so George didn't even get to villainize her; he heard all about the relationship and breakup from Clay, and it seemed that Clay's internalized homophobia and her want to be in a relationship didn't mix well, so they broke up and went their separate ways.

Even so, George could tell that Clay felt more horrified than he did, so he kept up his smile and fought every instinct in his body to reach forward and pat Clay's shoulder at the very least. His hands twitched at his sides.

"Well, let's get ready for dinner!" Clay's mom said with much enthusiasm that somehow made George feel yet *less* enthusiastic about this entire situation. "Oh, and George, I already set out some clothes for you on your bed."

"Oh... okay, thank you," George says as he turns his back on Clay and his ex, and all the people in the household who found some way or another to look down on him. Instead, he went where he apparently belonged, which was the basement with an outfit picked out for him like he was some doll to dress up.

The car ride over was perhaps the most miserable experience yet.

Tori's twin kids, who were around six or seven, sat on either side of him whereas George wound up cramped in the middle. "They like to sit at the window seats," Tori says airily as she looks over at George with raised brows, "that's fine with *you*, right?"

And who would George be to oppose the great Tori? So he just smiled and nodded and now here he was, cramped between two children with his boyfriend sitting right behind him, so close yet so far. Sofia was right behind him as well, next to Clay, and he could hear every breath of their conversation. Sofia seemed like a bubbly and happy person and overall pleased to see Clay again. Clay only reciprocated.

I'm not jealous, I'm just worried.

Things got a whole lot more worrisome once they arrived at the restaurant, which was filled with similar people as Clay's family. The whole place had a golden, The Great Gatsby feel (that reminded him of one of the clues he first left in the yellow notebook, "an amber eye watches over a city of blue"). Brilliant, shimmering chandeliers dangled from the ceiling and over every other table. Despite there being many tables filled with people in tuxedos and nice dresses, the noise

level of the room was relatively low and polite.

The table that awaited them was long and filled with expensive, gold-rimmed china and crystal wine glasses. Given there were twelve people there, the table felt like it stretched on almost as long as the hallways in Clay's mother's home.

But, she seemed to have the eyes of a hawk. Just as George was about to sit beside Clay as one would, Clay's mother practically swooped in. Even so, she didn't break that wide, sickening smile of hers. "George, dear, why don't you sit next to the twins?"

George's jaw nearly drops. What was *with* this lady? "Oh, alright," George says, and despite Clay's looks of *I'm so sorry* he was shooting him over the table, George just shrugged and took his place next to the children. The only relieving part of the situation was that Anna took the other seat next to him.

"I'm so sorry," Anna whispers to him, quiet enough that no one else at the table could hear, "my mom is really a prick sometimes."

"It's fine," George lies as he absently flips through the menu, even if he felt like he didn't have an appetite. "I'll just... enjoy this boujee steak that must've been wrapped in gold because it's almost eighty dollars."

Anna laughs beside him, apparently too loudly as her mother looked at her with a warning gaze. "Dang, I hate it here. I hate this dress too, I feel like my boobs are suffocating."

"Same," George starts, "I mean, not to that *last* part, but-"

Anna laughs more, and George discovered something he admired about her. No matter how many warning looks her mother sent her across the table, she didn't adjust to fit her mother's needs. She laughed as loud as she deemed fit.

That was a trait that Clay had inherited too, that unyielding, unapologetic-ness. It was what made Clay chase down his plane, and what made him kiss her even in front of all those people.

George looked across the table to find Clay talking to Sofia. Clay was dressed similarly to George in a white button down and black tie tucked into black slacks. George envied Sofia in that moment as he wished *he* could be the one flirting with Clay.

Somehow, things managed to get worse.

After trying to find something that actually sounded like it would taste good and sitting through a painful dinner which he tried to stay as silent as possible through, apparently there was a special feature to this restaurant:

A dance floor.

As if this couldn't get any worse, George thought to himself as Clay's mother successfully pressured Sofia and Clay to dance together. George had to give it to Clay for really, *really* trying to not dance. He went through every excuse in the book; first he said he needed to go to the bathroom, then he said he wasn't feeling well, then he got desperate enough to say he didn't know how to dance. But somehow, here Clay was, his hands as far away from Sofia's waist as he could manage, yet they were still *so* close together.

George sighed. It wasn't like *he* took fancy dancing lessons when he was a kid. And the only person he wanted to dance with in the world was already in someone else's arms. So he decided to watch from afar until suddenly, a hand was presented before him.

Slowly, George followed his eyes from the hand up to find Anna's smiling face. She really did look like Clay.

"May I have this dance?" Anna asks.

"Uh," George replies. That was his boyfriend's *sister*.

As if she could read his mind, Anna just laughs and says in a low voice, "don't worry, George, I'm a lesbian."

Without further ado, George finds himself being tugged from his sad, lonely chair and onto the dance floor with Anna, who was a very good dancer herself.

"Maybe we should swap outfits," Anna says, "because I'm *really* jealous that you get to wear a button down and I don't."

George laughs, and though he stumbled here and there, he worked it out. The music was instrumental and likely the works of Mozart due to its monotony, which matched the atmosphere strikingly well. But, as George found himself being spun around, he looked across to see Sofia edging closer and closer to Clay.

"Hey, eyes on me," Anna murmurs, giving George's shoulder a tap.

"Sorry," he blurts, "I just--"

"You don't have to lie to me," she says in a soft voice, green eyes flickering across the room to where her mom was dancing with her boyfriend, "I know that you and Clay are dating, and probably have been for years at the looks of it."

George's face flushes as he opened his mouth to defend himself, but she was quick to stop him. "There's no point denying. As a fellow gay, I *get* it. And you were kind of on thin ice earlier, but don't worry, I don't think anyone has their head enough out of their own asses to figure it out. Except for maybe Alex, but that's only because he's bi."

George sighs in relief. "Thank *God*. I was going crazy keeping that all to myself. Your mom definitely hates me..."

"Eh, take it as a compliment if she doesn't like you," Anna mutters, "almost as much of a compliment as if Tori doesn't like you."

"Well, she doesn't like me either, so!"

Anna laughs shortly. "Consider me your wingwoman. I'll do my best to cover for you and Clay, alright? Maybe once Alex comes back tomorrow, we can get him in on it, too."

For the first time all night, George feels a fond, genuine smile grow across his own face. "Thank you, Anna," he says sincerely, "really, I'm glad we have you."

"Yeah... I'm just glad my big brother finally found someone to humble him after all these years."

George reflects her gentle laugh, yet his eyes find Clay's across the room. Even in that moment, where they couldn't have been more than fifty feet away, they couldn't have felt more far apart.

Clay:

George

Come up here

George:

I'll get caught

Clay:

I would go to you but

That basement bed is rly shitty so

George:

Yeah, tell me about it

Clay:

Lmao

I'm sorry babe

George:

B a b e

Clay:

Stfu just get up here

George sighs a little. After finally getting out of that outfit and back into his more comfortable clothing, George decided that he couldn't say no to Clay. Especially not after his mom practically pushed him down the stairs to go to the basement as opposed to going upstairs with Clay.

So, George took a deep breath, pushed his phone into his back pocket, and sneaked up the basement stairs as silently as his feet would allow. He looked through the crack between the door and the frame to see that no one was in the hallway between this door and the stairs to the top floor, but he could hear noises coming from the TV room to indicate that someone was still awake watching a movie.

And, upon further inspection, he realized it was no one other than Clay's mother. Just his luck.

But, as George looked down at his phone once again, reading over Clay's texts to come upstairs, George already had his mind set. He wasn't about to let his boyfriend down.

Carefully as possible, George slipped through the door, shut it behind him, and tip-toed along the stretch to the stairs. One step, two steps, four steps, he was so, so close-

But of course, *of course* a sound had to interrupt. He heard the couch rustle with someone getting up, and the distant voice of who must be Dan, Clay's mom's boyfriend, that he realized he either booked it up the stairs, or leapt into the closet.

He went with the later option.

He practically threw himself in there and shut the door behind him as quietly as possible, which wasn't really quiet at all. He cringed. His heart was beating progressively faster as he could hear the footsteps edging closer and closer to his all-too symbolic hiding place.

George looked around and squinted in the dark to realize there was nowhere to hide or crawl under, a painful conclusion he came to as soon as the door swung open.

"George?" came Clay's mother's voice. He gulped. She was dressed in a sleeping gown and wore a tired expression. "What are you doing in the closet?"

George nearly choked. That hit *way* too close to home. "Clay... he told me there were video games in here," he mutters, "and, um, I thought that I could... get them?"

Clay's mom's eyes narrowed at him. "Hm. Interesting. Well, you shouldn't disturb Clay, he likes to go to sleep early."

That couldn't be more false, George thinks to himself at all the nights that went down the drain to how many all-nighters they pulled in college, and even when they were an ocean away and Clay stayed up all night just to talk to him.

"Yeah, my bad," George responds, trying not to sound too dejected. "I guess I'll just go to bed, then. Good night."

"Good night," she replies wearily.

George considered throwing himself down the staircase. He might as well have.

"*I'm sorry*," came Clay's voice, crackly over the phone. George wished he could hear his voice beside him as opposed through a phone speaker. George sighed a little. He was laying on his back and staring at the ceiling of the floor that separated them. It was just like on the dance floor: maybe only a floor separated them, but they felt so, so far apart.

"It's alright," George answers, "not your fault..." He sighs once more, "the bed feels so cold without you..." He didn't mean to say that bit aloud, but he didn't lie. George was still huddled to *his* side of the bed as he was used to Clay taking up the other side. Really, they hadn't slept apart for an entire year. The only nights they wouldn't be in the same bed were the occasional ones where one would be off visiting someone, or when George would be up late getting work done. Even then, Clay would wrap his arms around him from behind, rest his chin on his shoulder at murmur "come back to bed, George" in his sleepy, low voice.

"*I had no idea Sofia was going to be there*," Clay begins, "*or that we would be dancing and doing dumb rich people shit-*"

"Clay, it's fine," George interrupts. "Seriously. It's not your fault. Besides, I got to dance with Anna."

"*Oh, did you now? My own sister is taking my boyfriend from me!*"

“Yeah, you better watch out, Clay,” George teases.

And for the next hour or so, they drifted away from that heavy conversation they didn’t want to take on, and they talked about lighter things, happier things. They joked and talked until George fell asleep over the phone. Clay seemed to know it as he whispered a soft “I love you, George” into the phone. For a second, George pretended that Clay was next to him in bed, and that Clay had said that into his ear and not through his phone.

If George had a dollar for every time someone interrupted a moment between him and Clay when they would finally get to kiss, he would be as rich as Clay’s mom.

The first time was the following morning when Clay went to go wake up George to come shopping with them, and for some reason, Tori’s twins were just standing in the doorway the whole time. They were suspiciously like the twins from “The Shining”.

The second time was when Clay was “showing George where the towels were” for the shower when really he was going to sneak down into the basement with him and show him where the towels were *there* but his mother swooped in, fresh towels already in her hands to hand off to them.

The third time was when George and Clay were alone in the kitchen for just a second, and George was about to steal just a *peck* of a kiss when Tori was suddenly there.

It wasn’t even noon. It wasn’t even *noon* and this bullshit was already happening over and over.

And then, somehow George was sent on a shopping trip with Clay.

But the twins went with them.

“They need to get out of the house,” Tori said, “but Jason and I would like to stay here to help my mom make dinner. Can’t you take them with you?”

George was about done with Tori and her *needs*. But he didn’t say that, so he just smiled and nodded, and took both of the twins’ hands in his. However, he managed to get Clay to come along with the excuse that he couldn’t drive. Before Clay’s mother could open her mouth to say that *Anna* could drive, the two scurried out of the house.

And so, that was exactly how George ended up at a shopping mall, between the twins yet again as he held either of their hands in his.

“What are we here for, exactly?” George murmurs, looking over to Clay who was looking from store to store. It was crowded and loud and there, but it didn’t have the same spirit and energy as New York City.

“We’re picking up wine and some groceries,” Clay answers, “want to split up? I can take one of the twins with me, and we can meet back up at the ice cream store?”

“Yeah, sure,” George agrees. He really wished these twins weren’t here. He wished they weren’t here so he and Clay could drive off and find somewhere to make out because god dammit he was getting really sick of this.

But he held true to his promise to go off and pick up the wine from the designated store. Cecilia, the twin girl he was with, was actually pretty adorable and sweet, unlike her mother. “George,

George,” she murmured, tugging on his hand as she pointed to the toy store across from the wine shop. “Can we go in there? Just to look around? Please?”

George looked down at her and heaved a sigh. She really had mastered her puppy eyes in a way that made George regret existing. He could *never* have kids, because he just couldn’t say no to them. “Of course,” he responds as he thanks the woman who handed him the ordered wine, “let’s meet up with Clay and Joseph first, though-”

“No!” she exclaims, “I wanna go *now*.” It was truly unfair because she had Clay’s eyes and freckles and chubby little cheeks and blonde hair tied into two pigtails.

This was exactly how George found himself being dragged along the toy store by a six-year-old girl with a shockingly strong grip. His arms were quivering from holding the small crate of wine as it was heavy, and he hadn’t been to the gym for longer than he’d like to admit.

Turns out that Cecilia didn’t just want to “look around.” Either than, or her definition of *looking* was *buying*. “Come on, it’s almost Christmas,” George insists. He squats down to match her height. “Can’t you wait for Santa to bring you some toys?”

“Nope,” she says stubbornly. Her little hand was clasped tight around a teddy bear she had found. “I want it now.”

“Well, you can’t have it now,” George says as gently as possible. “I’m sorry, Cecilia. How about we go home and help your mom make some Christmas cookies?”

Oh, but no matter how gently George talked to her, all Cecilia could hear was the fact that her request was being denied. And in an instant, her brows drew together and her mouth opened slowly and it was as if she was a wind-up toy, because her silence was burst with a loud burst into tears and all of a sudden she was full-out wailing.

“Cecilia, come on now,” George practically begs her. He tries to pick her up or something, but she swats at him in anger.

“No!” she wails, “no no no!”

George thought he might cry too, out of pure frustration. People passing looked at him, half of pity and half of annoyance. George was one more condescending look away from losing his mind.

Somehow, he managed to coax Cecilia from the store and towards the exit. He could see Clay across the mall, holding Joseph’s hand, who of course was perfectly calm and good and not throwing a fit over a teddy bear.

But the second they stepped through the door, the alarm went off.

That was it. This was George’s breaking point.

He whirled around to find the store manager storming towards him, and he looked at them in bewilderment. “I didn’t even buy anything,” George insists.

“That much is clear,” the store manager replies angrily. “Let me see your bag.”

“I mean, okay, but-”

He hands over the grocery bag slung over his arm without fight, ready for the employee to take one look at the nonexistent contents and let him go about his day, but of course the universe couldn’t

be so kind to him.

The woman fished her hand around the bag and drew out a very familiar looking teddy bear.

“What the- I didn’t even-” In an instant, George looked down to Cecilia, who had a very guilty expression on her face. “Cecilia, did you put that in there?” he asks as calmly as possible, but she only cried harder.

“Seriously?” employee lady asks. Even more people were staring. “You’re trying to blame the *child?*”

“I’m twenty-four years old!” George wails, “why would I steal a teddy bear?!”

“You’re twenty-four?” the woman marvels, “I thought you were, like, sixteen at most-”

“I’ll buy the bear if you *really* want me to, but I’m telling you I don’t know how it wound up in there,” George says breathlessly, “just please, *please*, for the love of GOD, let me leave this place.”

At all the commotion, it seemed Clay’s attention had been caught as George felt a familiar hand on his shoulder.

And that was how George ended up in the car, trying to explain everything to Clay. And Cecilia sat in the back seat, face drying from tears and teddy bear clasped tightly in her hands. George caught her eye in the mirror to find her smiling evilly at him.

He took it back. She was *just* like her mother.

Chapter 4

Clay

It was a completely justifiable conclusion that George was cursed.

First, he managed to get both Clay's mother and Tori to hate him. Then, he got caught trying to get up to Clay's room. And the real sucker was that he got caught for "shop lifting" that he never even committed.

The other thing was that Clay's father seemed to be a hermit. His fiancé, Carol, was very social and pleasant (and most everyone acted as such back to her, other than his own mother who was a bit passive-aggressive to the poor lady). It was more than a little disheartening that his own father couldn't afford to come out into the open and have a conversation that was more than "how have you been" and "oh that's nice."

After spending the rest of the day separated from his boyfriend, Clay realized he had one goal, and one goal only:

Get George alone. All to himself. Even if just for a few minutes!

He was sick of only having conversations over the phone, of seeing each other across rooms but not being able to hold him. It was like there were invisible barriers between them everywhere they went.

But Clay was determined, *determined* to knock those barriers down if it was the last thing he did.

Once they returned from the mall, his mother sent George and Anna to get the flowers and had Clay and Tori set up the Christmas tree. Despite this all being for a Christmas Eve party, all of their actions felt robotic as opposed to festive and fun, like how they were when he, George, and Nick went to get their Christmas trees and lights.

And, once everyone was home once again, they were greeted with Clay's mother, who was smiling that too-bright smile that meant she definitely had something up her sleeve. "How about you all go get dressed? We have another dinner party to get to," she says as she claps her hands together. "Clay, come with me, I have something special for you to wear."

Clay was actually going to scream. He was *actually* going to lose his mind and he knew George shared mutual feelings judged on the look he gave him across the room. Clay was just about to go to the basement with George, but no, of *course* the universe couldn't be so kind-

He gave up all fight as he followed his mom up the stairs, down the hall and to the right into the main bedroom. It was huge: a large, king-sized canopy bed and a just as large bathroom complete with a gigantic shower and bathtub. Clay figured he could fit his entire apartment in this space, which still might be a bit generous.

"Here," she says gently, presenting Clay with a light and dark blue tie, "it was the tie your father wore on our first date."

Clay looked at the tie in mild surprise. Half in surprise that his mother still had it, the other half being that she was giving it to him.

"Thanks," he says instead of questioning it, taking the tie and turning it over in his hands. It was

silky to the touch, and smooth despite being so many years old.

“Clay,” she says behind him before he could step out of the room. He looks back at her to see that her eyes were filled with something akin to worry. “What’s with that George boy?”

“What do you mean?” Clay replies.

“I mean... there’s something off about him. He seems so nervous all the time.” Clay gulps and shrugs, but she continues on. “And he seems to always want to be around you... but why wouldn’t his own family take him in for the holidays?”

“They’re not the nicest people,” Clay says before he can stop himself, “they got in a little fight and... well, honestly that’s none of your business.”

His mother narrows her eyes at her son. “Could it be that he...” Oh no, here it comes- “...is trying to rob us?”

It was such a stupid conclusion that Clay nearly burst into laughter. “*What?*” Clay asks incredulously, “rob us- Mom, you’re joking, right?” Assuming that this was a joke, because it had to be, Clay laughed that wheezy laugh of his until he realized there wasn’t a trace of amusement on his mom’s blank face. “Oh, you’re being serious?” For some reason, *that* made it funnier.

“Of course I am, Clay. I’m actually very concerned about this. Maybe his family confronted him about his shop lifting addiction-”

“He didn’t shop lift!” Clay cries, “Cecilia put the teddy bear in his bag when he wasn’t looking, she admitted it just a minute ago!”

“Clay, you need to be careful, sweetie. People who rob other people clearly aren’t right in the head.” Both of her cold, wrinkled hands cupped Clay’s face as if he was a little boy again. It was as if she couldn’t hear a word he was saying.

He remembered how she used to do this with his friends in elementary school. If a boy looked at him too long, that meant he was planning to beat Clay up, according to his mother. If a girl got too close to Clay, it meant she wanted to marry him. Before this moment, where Clay was looking into the eyes of a stranger, he had completely forgotten all about those moments. He forgot because he left her to move in with his dad in New York to leave her behind in Florida.

Clay takes his face from his mother’s hands. He felt the anger bubble in his veins because he wasn’t a kid anymore, and neither was George. “You’re wrong,” he says with full confidence. “You’re wrong, Mom. George is a good person. A great person. The most pure-hearted person I’ve *ever* met. And you know what? You’ll feel pretty stupid the day you realize that.”

Clay wished he could tell her right then that he knew this for a fact because he planned on marrying this man, but he bit his tongue. Not yet, he had to wait.

“I’ll be here the day you realize you’re wrong, Clay,” she says in a voice behind him that was so eery that Clay felt a chill run down his spine. But he left the room and didn’t look back.

The dinner party was positively horrible.

It was this large, rented-out ballroom filled with his parents’ old friends and their grown-up kids. He tried to catch the eyes of the people he grew up with, to smile and wave at them, but almost

every time, he was met with a cold stare as a reply. After a few tries, he gave up.

“Why are we even here?” Anna says from beside Clay. Again, his mother somehow managed to get Anna in a dress, which was something of a miracle, but she looked about ready to tear the thing off and throw it in a fire.

“To suffer,” Clay responds.

“I suggest you two act at least a *little* mature,” Tori hisses at the two of them. Clay glowers. “No talking about Minecraft at the fancy party, okay?”

“I’ll talk about Minecraft all I want you psycho *bitch*,” Anna hisses back.

“Mama? What’s a psycho bitch?” Joseph asks from where he clung onto Tori’s leg.

“Great, you’re teaching my children to swear,” Tori starts angrily.

“A psycho bitch is what your mother is,” Anna replies without fear, and Joseph’s face lit up with excitement that he learned a new word.

“Psycho bitch! Psycho bitch!” Joseph sing-songs, “Mama’s a psycho bitch!”

One of his mother’s friends gave Joseph a questioning look that reeked of so much judgement that Clay and Anna actually burst out laughing.

Clay then looked over to see his dad, who somehow managed to crawl from whatever cave he had been hiding in for the past few days. He was dressed in a tux and black tie, talking pleasantly with Carol. They both were practically glowing with excitement, just at being in each other’s presence.

Clay caught his dad’s eye to receive a genuine, bright smile he hadn’t seen on his dad in such a long time. It filled his heart up with warmth in an instant.

But then he was brought back attention by his mother and Dan, who were standing side-by-side in front of him. When he caught his mother’s eyes, all he could hear in his head was Joseph’s voice saying *psycho bitch! Psycho bitch! Mama’s a psycho bitch!*

“This is my son, Clay,” his mom said as she waved a dainty hand in his direction to a few of her friends. They regarded him as if he was an exhibit in a zoo. “He graduated top of his class at NYU. He’s a talented... what is it that you do, dear? Coding?”

“Coding,” Clay confirms in a flat voice.

“Yes, that’s it. Kids these days, I never know what they’re talking about,” she adds, to which all of them politely chuckle on command. What was with these people? Did they have sticks so far up their asses that they just didn’t have a sense of humor?

“Oh, and this is Tori, my oldest, and Anna, my youngest.” Then, without further word, his mother strutted off with her gaggle of friends as if they were parading around to judge other people’s lives. Actually, there was no “as if” about it. That was *exactly* what they were doing.

But there was just one thing off about all of this.

Where was George?

Clay got on his tip-toes to peek over the heads of everyone in the room and search for the only person that mattered. His eyes flickered over his sister, who was very clearly flirting with the

bartender, and Tori, who was having a quiet conversation with her husband. And then, his eyes landed on him: there he was, emerging from the direction of the bathrooms, eyes wide as he peeked around here and there, people bumping into him as they passed, and in that moment, he looked devastatingly lost.

Despite technically belonging here, Clay felt pretty lost, too.

Clay was about to push through the crowd to get to George, about to grasp his hand without caring what the murmurings around them said or what his *mother* would say, but the moment was shattered before his eyes as the person who appeared before him wasn't George, but Sofia.

"Hi!" Sofia says in that cheery voice of hers. It's a good thing Clay has become an expert at keeping up fake smiles.

"Hi," he says slowly, "you're at this party, too?"

"Yup, you know how it is." She laughs, "I'm so glad we can see each other again, you know? It's been too long."

No it hasn't. Clay smiles anyway. "Yeah! Yeah. Totally." His voice flattens to silence in a way that he hopes feels awkward enough for Sofia to find some excuse and vanish into the crowd once more, a crowd where Clay needed to rescue his boyfriend from, but alas, Sofia was a fighter.

"Want to dance?" Sofia asks all of a sudden as she motions to the dance floor. He looked over to see Alex and Anna slow-dancing together, except they were purposely being as ridiculous as possible by shouting "poggers" and pointing at poor, random strangers and saying "it's not gay if it's three way" so often that Clay actually managed to laugh at it.

Clay looks down at Sofia's extended hand and the world it promised: his mother's world. The world that was expected to him. And then his gaze flickered to the crowd he knew George was lost in. He knew that the world George would give him was the world that was wrong in his mother's eyes, but right in his own. A world of living cheap but loving rich.

"I'll pass," he declines cordially, still bowing politely, "but thanks for the offer. My friend got lost in that crowd, so I better go and find him." He didn't miss the slight confusion to flash across her face, but frankly, he didn't care.

And, once he reached the center of the mass of people, he finally found George, who was floundering left and right with a barely-touched glass of champagne held in his hand. As soon as they met eyes, George's entire expression seemed to relax. "Oh thank God you're here," he says, "I was so lost."

"Yeah," Clay says breathlessly, "me too. Now let's get the hell out of here."

Easier said than done.

Clay was about one more small inconvenience away from absolutely losing his shit.

Once the two of them started making a beeline for the exit, Tori caught on, which means her two children (more like henchmen) followed in pursuit, and then her husband, and then Alex because he made it his hobby to torment Tori, and then eventually his mother because she wondered what all the commotion was about.

In other words, this was exactly how Clay ended up driving a car full of people to see the sunset at

the beach as opposed to just George, with his feet up on the dash and head thrown back with laughter. Nope. George was cramped in the back seat to the point where Clay couldn't even catch his eye in the mirror.

But, the sunset was beautiful. Once they all walked onto the beach and laid out some blankets to sit on, they sat in silence as they admired the way the sun sank below the horizon. Colors of hot pink and orange and yellow exploded across the sky and faded into blue as the dim stars began to come from the sky.

It was kind of beautiful how they all could sit together and set aside their differences to appreciate Mother Nature together, even as they were all dressed for a dinner party. Despite their differences and occasional squabbles, they would always have this moment. Even George, who Clay's mother suspected was trying to rob them; even Tori, who seemed set to always sabotage Clay's life; even *Alex*, who wasn't part of the family whatsoever and somehow managed to pop up out of thin air.

And, as the sun sunk into nothingness and the stars took over the sky the sun once ruled, the twins were clearly falling asleep and Clay's mother said something about wanting to make her nightly cup of tea.

"Come on, boys, time to go," Clay's mom says as she dusts the sand from her dress. She looks down to Clay and George, who still remained on the sand. They were five feet apart, which was way too much for Clay's liking.

Clay looked up at her, and then at George. "I think we'll stay," he says, "we like stargazing sometimes, and the sky is so clear and perfect tonight."

At first, Clay waited for some excuse to arise, some reason for him to come along and be denied of his time with George once again, but the moment never came. Instead, she looked between them, and gave a slow nod before she left with everyone else. Neither Clay or George moved a muscle until the sounds of distant chatter faded away completely, and the distant sounds of the engine faded into nothing. With one last glance over his shoulder to confirm that they were completely gone, Clay practically leapt onto George and engulfed him in the most satisfying hug he'd experienced in maybe all his life.

"Holy fuck," Clay whispers, "I was about to lose my mind. Could you tell?"

"Yeah," George says, laugh breathy and hands already pushing at Clay's shoulders lightly so that he could look him in the eyes. Clay didn't realize that the force of him jumping onto George sent them tumbling onto the sand until he looked into George's eyes, back pressed against the sand, dark orbs of irises filled with stars. "But," George whispers, his thumb tracing along Clay's jaw in a slow, soft way, "I'm going to go crazy if you don't kiss me right now."

Who would Clay be to deny such an eloquent request?

And Clay kisses him. Even though he'd done it a thousand times before, it never failed to raise the butterflies in his stomach and make them flutter out of control. He didn't care that it was freezing. All he cared about was the fact that George was lightly tugging on his hair in a way he knew meant *more, more, more*. So he granted it. He kissed his lips and his eyelids and his neck and his hands and his lips again until they were both breathless and panting for air.

"I have a proposition for you," Clay says, his voice a little raspy from lack of use for the past... however many minutes it had been.

"Oh yeah?" George muses, and though Clay couldn't properly see him in the dark aside from the

distant glow of the stars, he could tell he was raising his brows. “And what would that be? More kissing?”

Clay laughs. “Not quite, though I’m not opposed to that.” He nuzzles his head deeper into the crook of George’s neck and George wraps his arms tighter around his back. “I was thinking we could go swimming.”

“Oh, that sounds nice,” George says in a daze before Clay can tell he stopped to think about it. “Wait, you mean like... right now?”

“Yup.” Clay lifts his head to look at George and his star-filled eyes. “What, scared?”

George scoffs. “No, you idiot. We just don’t have swim suits. Or towels.”

“I have towels in the trunk of my car. And who needs swim suits anyway?”

“No way in hell, Clay.”

Oh, but apparently it was *yes* way in hell because once Clay was bounding towards the ocean and the small, ebony waves lapping against the shores, he heard George shouting behind him, something about how it wasn’t fair that Clay got there first with a head start.

Only casting one last glance over his shoulder, Clay balls up the button-down and black slacks he had been wearing and threw them somewhere onto the beach before he dove right into the freezing-cold water. There was something liberating about taking off that layer of pretend and give in to what he *wanted* to be, even if what he wanted came in the form of a screeching boyfriend and a frigid ocean.

It took a lot of coaxing on Clay’s end to fully convince George to wade out into the water, and once he dunked his head, Clay was sure the entire state could hear the unholy shriek that followed.

“Clay, what the fuck?! It’s so cold!”

But Clay only laughs and makes a silent motion for George to swim over to him. And George obliges.

Clay catches him by the waist and draws him in. Not to kiss him, just to hold him closer.

“Hi,” he murmurs, relishing in the way George’s arms looped around his neck without second thought.

“Hi,” George responds. Even though they were the only people probably awake in all of Florida, they spoke in a whisper.

“So, what do you think of almost-skinny dipping in the middle of the winter?”

George scrunches his nose. “I think that I’m definitely going to catch a cold, but it’s... kind of thrilling, I guess.”

“Yeah?” Clay can’t resist from pulling George all the way forward and instead of just floating close to each other, they were embracing, and though he could feel George tense with surprise, he could also feel him relax, and feel the laugh vibrate against his shoulder.

Clay fully expected a playful jab or joke, and he would’ve endorsed it. But instead, George hugged him back just as tightly and stayed quiet. There was something so peaceful about knowing that George missed Clay just as much as Clay missed George.

"I love you," George mutters against Clay's damp hair.

"I love you too," Clay mutters back.

They stay like that for a long time, just hugging, floating in the cold-ass water, looking at the stars and at each other, occasionally kissing but mostly just existing and taking in each other's company while they could. Clay made a game of watching the stars in the reflection of the ocean, trying to find constellations within the dark ripples. And, once he pointed this out to George in what became a successful distraction, Clay silently slipped under the surface of the water before he pulled a prank as old as time when it came to swimming in the ocean, which was swimming under the surface undetected, grabbing someone, and scaring the shit out of them.

Turns out, his endeavor was entirely successful with someone like George, who was already quite skittish. But, Clay decided to go the extra mile; instead of just grabbing his ankles, he decided to full on scoop him up from underwater. He feared George might have a heart attack, but that didn't make it any less funny.

"CLAY!" George screams, so loud Clay can feel his ears ringing. Clay was laughing too hard to care as he had George over his shoulder, who was protesting angrily against his hold. "Clay, you bitch! I'll fucking murder you!"

"You love me too much," Clay replies, but he was already letting go of George who fell back into the water with a loud splash.

"Want to test that theory?" George replies, and before Clay can react, George pounced on him. But, once he had a hold on him, he didn't let go. He just hung onto him, by the shoulders, and looked him in the eyes. All mischief faded as their eyes locked, and the only thought in Clay's mind was *fuck, I'm so in love with him*.

"What happened to fucking murdering me?" Clay teases, and George shoots him with a sour expression.

"You're lucky I love you," he says, already leaning in, "or else you would be *so* dead right now."

Clay smiles against his lips. "See? Told you."

"Shut *up*." And he does. Their lips meet for the umpteenth time, both shivering and goosebump-ridden, but not daring to break the kiss until they reach the point where oxygen is necessary.

When they do end up breaking apart, still holding each other, Clay realized that the water around them had faded from a deep black shade to a bright, cotton-candy pink. As he looked up, he saw the sun rising, and the beautiful colors being reflected onto the ocean. The colors rippled around them and all of a sudden, Clay felt like he was inside of a painting with a breathtaking pastel palette.

"Woah," George whispers, his fingers tracing along the thin surface of the water, "it's... beautiful."

Clay nods in agreement as he picks up George's hand, squeezes it, and watches the sunrise in silence.

They eventually decide that they *really* need to get back as they apparently stayed up the entire night, somehow.

"Wait, wait, just one more," George insisted as they got into the car. George had been shivering so

much that Clay took pity on him and donated a hoodie to him once they got in the car.

“Don’t get too carried away,” Clay shoots back, but they both knew this was just as much to himself as it was to George. They kiss, just one more time, over the middle console of Clay’s car before they drive home and sneak back into their respective rooms. It was like taking a big breath of air before diving back down into the deep end.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A brief explanation of Tori's motives and history.

Chapter Notes

The next chapter will be back to the usual, longer updates and plot :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tori

It all started with one minuscule interaction that most people would forget about within a few days.

She had been eight years old, back in the days where her biggest fear was the nonexistent monster under her bed and the gap between her and her siblings didn't seem so large. "Mama, why can't I play with Alex?" Tori had asked one summer day as she watched her brother and his friend pounce on each other in the backyard with nerf guns clasped in their hands.

"Because you're not Clay, Tori," her mother had replied with that wide, unapologetic smile.

Because you're not Clay, Tori.

She heard it in her head every time she watched Clay bring home a report card with straight A's, watched as he didn't fall apart even when their parents' marriage did. She wasn't Clay. That much became apparent the more they grew up.

When Tori got a boyfriend, she had to break up with him because of how overbearing her mother had been. When Clay got a girlfriend, she was invited to the Sunday family dinners over the summers when Tori, Clay, and Anna stayed in Florida with their mother.

Because Clay was *Clay*, and Clay was the favorite, something Tori never would be.

She even heard this when she looked at people above her everywhere; teachers, employers, boyfriends, her husband. Whenever she did something wrong, she heard it: *you're not Clay, Tori*. Or, as she translated: *you'll never be good enough*.

Tori did the one thing her mother trained her to do, which was marry rich and have kids. Two kids with all the hope of the world in their eyes.

Cecilia had eyes like Clay's, and it killed her every time she looked into them.

She really didn't want to come to this family reunion but she knew she had to. She was morally obligated. But there was a surprise: Clay brought home a friend.

Tori didn't mean to prey on him. In fact, she wasn't interested in this *George* at all, and wasn't interested in antagonizing him in any way.

But after some surface-level inspection, she realized that the guy was odd. *Very* odd. Maybe it was in the way he carried himself, or the way he looked at Clay-

The way he looked at Clay... it was as if he was seeing the stars for the first time and couldn't stop looking at them. George looked like he would give the world to see Clay smile. He looked like he would do *anything* for Clay to be happy. Tori scoffed at him. What was such a boy so full of love doing pining after her brother? Yet another victim to Clay's charm.

At first, Tori suspected she overanalyzed. Or, at most, that George was suffering an unrequited love, but alas, as if the awkward dinner parties or multiple instances where George stammered over simple explanations or looked like a kicked puppy that time when Clay and Sofia danced, her suspicions were confirmed.

That night, when the rest of the family left the beach to go home and get to bed, Tori stayed out of sheer curiosity with the excuse that she wanted to stargaze with Clay and George.

It didn't take long before she watched her brother pounce on George and they kissed and kissed, and she looked away.

They were *so* in love.

Tori felt like a monster, but also a genius. It almost made it worse that George's love wasn't unrequited, because it made it so much harder to antagonize her brother.

But, as she called herself an Uber, all she could hear was her mother's innocent voice that was twisting and sounding like her own, nowadays.

You're not Clay.

That she wasn't.

Chapter End Notes

sorry I was literally drunk when I wrote this

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

ngl this chapter was mostly a filler,, and there's some hurt/comfort and angst but don't worry, the second half of the chapter is happier :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George

Though it was depressing waking up each morning without Clay beside him, George never woke up without a morning text, each one sappier than the last.

On the first day, it had been a simple “good morning BABE” which made George laugh because every time Clay attempted to use that term of endearment, George always teased him for it.

The next morning, it had been “good morning George :) I love you” and then a text an hour later that said “SAY IT BACK!”

But, the morning following, George was pleased to find that *he* woke up before Clay for maybe the first time in years.

George:

Good morning Clay :)

Last night was a lot of fun

Clay:

Woah, you woke up before

I did?! Is the world ending?!

Yeah, last night was a lot of

fun :)

I love you

George:

Yeah, yeah

Clay:

SAY IT BACK GEORGE

DON'T YOU LOVE ME :(

George:

Calm down lmao

I love you too <3

Clay:

Btw Sap said to send him more nudes

George:

Wtf no

Tell him that was a one time

thing

Clay:

YOU SENT HIM NUDES

George:

That's none of your business,

Clay :)

Despite the text notifications that hit his phone like a storm after that, he ignored each one and went over to Twitter instead to post an update about his streaming schedule. See, now that he and Clay were relatively successful YouTubers (well, in his case, anyway; Clay, or Dream, was VERY successful at this point), they had a big enough following that they had to stay consistent in their streaming times, even with full-time jobs. But, due to them being on vacation, they decided to take a break from streaming.

George didn't expect any following at all and mostly began his YouTube endeavor just for fun, and for something to do with Clay and Nick. And, out of respect to Clay not being out yet, they decided to not confirm their relationship (although, the fanbase was already picking up on it quite a lot...). However, George was out as gay and Nick was out as bisexual.

Eventually, George gathered the courage to set his phone aside, crawl from the squeaky basement bed and walk up the stairs to the main floor that, as always, was bustling with people. For once, the atmosphere felt nice when all the attention wasn't fixated on him and Clay. It was nice to watch from the outside as Clay's dad and his wife were in their own little world in the living room from where they were watching The Great British Baking Show.

Tori, Joseph, and Cecilia were attempting to make more Christmas cookies to join the other three batches they had already made over the past few days. Chocolate crinkles, sugar cookies, brown sugar cookies, and now, they were attempting pinwheel cookies. George had to admit, it was nice to be in a house where any attempts with baking didn't result in a small (or large) fire.

And then he saw Clay, sitting at the kitchen counter talking to Dan about some Florida football team George knew nothing about. His blonde hair was ruffled out of place from sleep, and in his hand he held a cup of orange juice simply because George knew he couldn't stand coffee. Even though George was merely standing in the doorway looking in on a life that wasn't his, it was nice

to see Clay thriving within it.

Yet, he was interrupted from his trance by the ringing of his phone in his back pocket. He had the weak hope that it would be Nick, or maybe Wilbur, his friend back at home; but as always, the world couldn't be so kind.

He stepped into a different room to take the call.

"Hi," he says shortly into the phone.

"Hi," the voice answered back.

"So... why are you calling me?" George says with more sass than he initially intended.

There was a heavy sigh on the other end. *"Because you're my son, George. And it's Christmas... and you're not here."*

"I'd love to be there," George says back, "if you would just-"

"Would just what, George? I'm sick of fighting with you!"

"Then stop fighting, Mum!" George shouts back. "Just... stop. Don't call me and say you want me to come home when you haven't changed one bit after last year. Do you remember what happened?"

There was silence. George remembered what happened last year. He came home for the holidays last year. He flew in the day before New Year's Eve because he missed his family so much and was willing to put aside their differences for once all year. But it ended in disaster. It ended in his father shouting at him saying "where did my little boy go?" and his brother crying saying that he missed him and supported him but just wanted him to stay home, and his mother... he couldn't get that look of disappointment in her eyes out of his head.

After three nights there, George had called Clay in the midst of a panic attack that took two hours over the phone and a booked plane ticket to calm him down from. He hadn't called his mother since. He tried calling his dad once, but it was awkward and pointless. His siblings, on the other hand, he called weekly.

"Of course I remember what happened," his mom responded, and it was clear there were tears in her eyes just at the shaky sound of her voice, *"George, let's just- I didn't call you to fight, I called you to say that I missed you."*

"You don't *get* to miss me!" George snaps back, and he was so invested, so angry, so hurt that he couldn't even feel the tear trickling down his cheek. "You don't get to ask me to come home until you at least *pretend*-" His voice broke. He couldn't finish the sentence. "Goodbye, Mum. Happy holidays. Feel free to call me back once Dad stops asking me why I'm doing *this* to him, as if it were a choice."

George didn't wait for her to answer, because he owed her nothing. He hung up and clasped a hand over his mouth as a weak attempt to draw the trickling tears back into his eyes. Yet, when he turned around, he saw someone in the doorway that wasn't his boyfriend.

Tori.

She stood there with a wide look in her eyes, and all of the previous malice he had seen seemed to have evaporated as they just looked at each other. George lets out a muffled sob behind his hand as

all dignity was lost.

“I’ll go get Clay,” she says in a quiet voice. And that was it. No prodding, no judgement.

George slinks into the chair in the corner as the world slowly blurred around him. It felt like no time was passing as he sat in the dark room, alone with his thoughts and words he didn’t say. It couldn’t have been more than a minute or two before a new figure stood in the doorway; a familiar, lanky, unfairly tall figure. He blinked away the blurring of his vision enough to see two kind, green eyes looking into his. A pair of hands wrapped around his wrists and gently tugged him to his feet to be tucked into Clay’s warm arms. Despite the events he just went through, he felt safe here.

“What’s wrong?” Clay asks, his voice nothing higher than a whisper. George appreciated the soft tone as he couldn’t take anything louder after listening to his mother yell at him over the phone.

George sobs in reply, and Clay just hugs him tighter. They sway a little, back and forth, and George practically clings onto Clay but Clay doesn’t show any sign of minding it. “It’s okay...I’m not going anywhere.”

He nods, and though George could hear the footsteps padding down the hall that were most certainly stopping at the doorway to see what was happening, he couldn’t find it in himself to care. And despite this, Clay didn’t so much as loosen his grip on him. He held his promise to not go anywhere just like he always did in the few times where George would break down like this. Sometimes, life was just too much.

“Thank you for being here,” George says into Clay’s now-dampened shirt. He’d stopped crying, but he didn’t feel like letting go just yet.

Clay rubs his hand along George’s back, “I keep telling you, George. I’ll always be here.”

George lifts his head from where it was buried on Clay’s shoulder and looks up at him through tear-dewed lashes and a sniffing, genuine smile. He wished he could kiss him right then, because he looked in Clay’s eyes, and he believed him.

“This is a death trap,” Alex whines, and for once, George agrees with him. Somehow, they found themselves at an Antique shop that seemed as if every item had been taken from the set of a low-budget horror movie.

After George felt better thanks to Clay’s support, the two went to the kitchen to find Clay’s mother making an announcement that they would all go shopping together that day. At first, George thought this meant going clothes shopping, which he already found boring. But no, it was so much worse.

Antique shopping.

“I feel like just stepping in this store will get me possessed,” George adds.

“The energy is *so* not right in here,” Anna says with a visible shiver. Clay rolls his eyes.

“Oh come *on*. You guys are all being such big babies,” Clay huffs, and practically shoves them into the store. The rest of the group was already halfway through this maze of a store. Why were these places always so cluttered?

“If I get possessed, I’ll be sure to ask the demon to kill you first,” Anna shoots back, reaching out

to ruffle Clay's hair. Clay scowls at her,

"Oh yeah? I'll ask *my* demon to kill *your* demon first!" Clay retorts. Alex shriek-laughed that laugh of his, loud enough for Clay's mom to turn around from far ahead and give him a warning look. He kept laughing anyway.

"Remind me, why are we here again?" George questions.

"To kill time," Clay answers with a sigh as he picks up a very cursed-looking doll and turns it over in his hands. George watches as he grimaces at it and sets it back down. "There's literally nothing to do in Florida, so we've given in to going to demon stores."

"Demon stores," George hums and looks around some more. Aside from the vintage books and pretty jewelry, the store was filled with ancient garbage, as Anna called it. And, George discovered a poster that just said *Homosexual Begone!* in big, bold print that George, Anna, and Alex laughed at so hard that they nearly got kicked out of the store.

"Clay, look at this poster! I think we should buy it and give it to Nick- Clay?" George looked behind him and all around him only to discover that his boyfriend was nowhere in sight. In fact, even when he got on his tip-toes, he couldn't see his blonde hair bobbing along the tops of the aisles. He frowns. How bizarre, usually it was easy to find Clay in these types of locations.

George began wandering off, peeking around corners and peering over aisles to try and find him, but it was useless. "Claaaaay~ are you pranking me?" George walks past a row of old, broken telephones and a sinister-looking dress until it finally occurs to him that he was stuck in a "demon store" with shitty cell service and a lost boyfriend. He was about to go back the way he came when suddenly, a hand clamped around his wrist, and before he knew it, he was being tugged into a half-open closet that slammed shut after him.

Before he could even shriek, a hand clamped over his mouth. "Shhhh," said a low voice, and George squinted his eyes through the darkness to try and find his captor. What was it with him and being shoved back into closets?

"What the fuck," George says, but his voice was muffled by the hand. After squinting and the slow adjustment of his eyes to darkness, George's form relaxed. "Clay?"

"Yeah, just thought we could get some privacy- George! Did you just lick my hand?!"

George snickers. "That's what you get for scaring the shit out of me. You could've just said *hey, wanna go make out in this closet?*"

"Oh, so that's what you think is going to happen?" Clay teases, but George didn't take the bait.

"What, did you take me in here to have a civil, heterosexual conversation?"

"Actually, yes. What are your opinions on politics, George? What do you do for a living?"

"Shut up," George whispers, but he was laughing behind his hand.

"Make me," Clay jokes, but there was a silence that made George blush as they looked at each other in the darkness of the closet. The small crack between the doors was enough for a small strip of light to illuminate Clay's eyes, and enough to show that they were already half-closed.

"Okay," George whispers, so anti-climactically that they both were giggling about it, the kiss lazy and not even a full kiss as Clay kept pulling back to laugh against his lips, but after a few moments,

they managed to gain some amount of sanity and kiss properly. It was so cramped in there that it made it hard for any movement at all, but they found a way. There was a lot of shuffling around and a lot of shushing each other and giggling, but after a few moments of silliness, Clay managed to duck down and kiss George again and tug at the hem of his shirt and kiss the crook of his neck and slot his hands around his waist in a way that made George make an embarrassing sound.

“No moaning in the closet, oh my *God*,” Clay whispers in a voice that actually sounded scandalized. George glares at him, but he was blushing so hard he feared Clay could feel the heat from the few inches he was away from his face.

“I fucking hate you,” George hisses back, but Clay kisses that same spot again with an abnoxious kissing noise and George smacks the top of his head. “What is **WRONG** with you?!” he whisper shouts.

“It’s not my fault you wanna have sex in the closet,” Clay responds.

“Get out. Get out now. This relationship is over.”

“And he still doesn’t deny it.”

George tried so hard to look like he was mad at him but he failed as they were both quiet-laughing so hard that it really made it hard to have a make out session when they were both laughing at each other.

And then, the closet door opens.

They both look up in an instant and get as far away from each other as possible.

But the only person who stood there was Alex.

“Oh, what’s up?” Alex says casually as he steps *into* the closet and shut the door behind him. They stare at him in a stunned silence as he just stood in there and scrolled through his phone. He looked back at them. “Oh, you can keep making out, I don’t mind.”

“Dude, what the hell?” George whispers, “what are you doing in here?”

“Staying away from Tori,” Alex replies, “because I taught Joseph how to properly say ‘Mamacita.’”

“Oh my God,” Clay whispers, and George can feel his head drop to rest on George’s shoulder.

“Yeah, and this looked like the perfect hiding spot, but I guess you two already figured that out.” Even though it was dark, George knew Alex was wiggling his brows at them. “Kinda funny to find two gays in a closet.”

“Now there’s three,” Clay responds, to which they all snicker. “Now all we need is Anna.”

“There’s no room,” George protests as his back was already squished against the wall, and Alex was squished into the other with Clay awkwardly in the middle. “If we stand in here for much longer, the closet will break..”

It was almost as if it were on cue, because in that moment, there was a loud crackling sound, and the closet gave a dangerous shudder.

“Go, go, go!” Alex was shouting, and all of a sudden the three were tumbling out of the closet and

running for it right out the front door of the store without further word. In fact, they sat there laughing their asses off on the bench outside the door until Anna came outside for them to tell her what happened, and *she* laughed her ass off almost all the way home.

And, though George's face was still warm and he could tell there was probably a hickey on his upper shoulder, he couldn't feel more happy when he looked over to Clay. Home was wherever Clay was, even if that was in a cramped demon closet.

Chapter End Notes

I HIGHLY recommend listening to "Like Real People Do" by Hozier because it totally fits the vibe of this fic!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

me: *has a fluffy happy chapter*

my readers: good, good, great

also me: *adds an angsty chapter*

my readers: ARE YOU FUCKING-

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tori

The past few days have been an emotional rollercoaster in Tori's eyes.

She started with the goal to simply survive, and then the following goal to figure out what Clay's secret was as he very clearly was keeping *something*. But, now that she had this information, she couldn't stop thinking about it. She wondered if she should approach one of them, or her *parents*, but instead, she remained silent.

The following morning of this discovery, she could hear George's voice distantly down the hall as she was on her way upstairs to get Cecilia's teddy bear for her, yet instead, she was met with the sight of her brother's boyfriend with a phone clutched in a shaking hand. He looked at her and didn't even contain the capacity to say a word as tears slipped from either cheek and all he could say was a sad sob that could only come from someone who had been in pain for a long, long time.

She felt the guilt twist its knife in her heart as she ran off to fetch her brother. "George needs you," she said simply. Clay's expression slackened and it was really hard to hate him because he ran so fast to see him, and in an instant he was hugging George tight and whispering sweet nothings into his hair as he cried, and as Tori watched, she felt like the person she made Clay out to be wasn't who he was at all.

And when they went to the Antique store, Tori spent her time quietly bickering with her husband about whether or not they should get a new set of china for the house before she noticed the absence of her brother, and then George. She didn't think much of it until she watched as they emerged from the store, giggly and flushed. They were the definition of young love, except something told her they would never get old.

It made her so *mad*.

At least, that's what she told herself. She felt this way because two men shouldn't be together. Yes. That's what this was.

(No, it wasn't.)

She was determined. George should know better. He should know that through so many tears and years spent mourning the loss of his family and their support. Tori pushed away the memories of George looking at Clay with practical hearts in his eyes, Clay holding George close to him.

She ignored all of this the moment she grasped George's wrist to prevent him from following Clay

upstairs. He looked at her with a wide, yet unsuspecting pair of eyes.

“Wait,” she whispers, “I need to talk to you.”

George followed her into her room without so much as a murmur of protest. He looked worried, but he said nothing.

“I know,” she starts, “I know that you and Clay are- well, I don’t actually know *what* you two have been up to but I saw you guys kissing at the beach.” Her tone sounded so accusatory and villainous that she couldn’t recognize herself. George’s eyes slowly became wider and wider.

“Oh,” he whispers. His fingers fiddled with his shirt sleeves nervously. “I guess there’s no point in denying it, then.” George clears his throat, and despite his visible discomfort, he looked Tori dead in the eyes as if he was calling her bluff. In a way, he most certainly was.

“Yes, there’s no point,” she agrees, “but George, you realize that... I can just tell my parents?”

At that, George’s face fell. The twinkle from his eyes faded to darkness and his entire body froze before in an instant, he was buzzing with fear and energy. “Tori, wait, please, *please* don’t do that. You have no idea what it’ll do to Clay, he’s been planning to come out to them, please-”

George was begging her, pleading with her, but there was nothing satisfying about it. George looked downright terrified. But not for himself. For *Clay*. She felt that familiar anger again.

“Why do you love *him*?” she suddenly snaps. George freezes again. “Why do you love someone as selfish and- and- egocentric as my brother?”

George’s expression softens. “Because he isn’t selfish,” he starts, voice soft despite the way it trembled, “he’s... sweet, and kind, and you’d be surprised that he remembers every single thing I say even though I’ve known him for six years. But Tori, he needs this. He needs this moment.”

Tori felt like she couldn’t breathe. George loved him so *much*. Why did everyone have to idolize him?

Maybe this was the final blow, the blow that could knock Clay from that stupid pedestal their parents built him.

“I’m sick of being second-best, George,” Tori starts. Her voice was hoarse and wild, “I’m sick of coming home to see Clay’s pictures and achievements on the walls with Clay-this, Clay-that, and now he’s gay? It’ll *kill* Mom to know that she’ll never have a step-daughter who is as image-obsessed as she is. And that you, a penniless New York boy- *that’s* the future of our bloodline.”

“Listen to me,” George starts, and he didn’t even flinch at the insults she hurled at him. “You can insult me all day. Hell, you can out *me* if you want. But I can’t let you out Clay. You just can’t. Tori, I know it’s hard living life in- in the shadows of someone else but don’t take that out on something he can’t control.”

“Oh? So it’s not a choice, then?” Tori retorts. George’s face drained of color. “Being gay, that is.”

“You,” he says, voice a whisper, “have no idea what the *fuck* you’re talking about.”

“Stay away from Clay,” she answers, “and I won’t say a word.”

Tori didn’t mean to say that. She didn’t *mean* to. But seeing George get so defensive of her stupid little brother, and see the hurt in his eyes on behalf of something Tori detested was too much.

George was Clay's weak link, she finally found it after all these years of analyzing.

George looked like his whole world fell apart as he slowly backed away from her. "Tori, you don't have to do this," he whispers as he backs away. "Please... don't hurt him. I won't let you."

"The choice is yours," she answers as she noticed that George had stepped entirely out of the room. "It's *your* decision, not mine, George."

Without another word, she shut the door on George, whose eyes were wide and terrified. She felt like a monster, but she couldn't find it in herself to care anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your reads and comments! They make my day :)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clay

It was so *hard* to keep his proposal a secret from George.

Every night since he got here, he called Nick to brainstorm the perfect setting and time to propose. He even called George's friend from Britain, Wilbur.

Just take him somewhere fancy and shit, Wilbur had said, and pull out the ring and say "marry me, and let us be gentlemen in love!"

Clay didn't take his advice, but he did listen to Wilbur's monologue about the unrequited love he's experienced. It was actually interesting to hear and learn from. (He noted to himself to never take advice from Wilbur.)

He felt so sure of himself. Every morning he woke without George beside him felt like a punch to the gut. He couldn't imagine ever becoming sick of him because even though he'd already memorized everything about him ranging from the tedious years of his teen life to the way he fiddled with his hands he was nervous, he knew that George was his home.

After they all returned home from the Antique store, Clay looked about for George only to find that he practically vanished in thin air for a collection of minutes before he returned looking absolutely exhausted and out of sorts. He excused himself to take a nap in his room, to which everyone hardly looked up at.

Clay ended up sneaking down into the basement about an hour later to see what George was up to, only to open the door to find his boyfriend true to his word. He was tucked in bed, shivering slightly, clinging onto himself and sleeping otherwise soundly.

Sighing softly, Clay took off his jacket and draped it over him. He could've gotten another blanket, but he figured this could be a sign that he had been here. He leaned forward, brushed the hair from George's forehead, and gently kissed there before he shut the door behind him and went the way he came.

When Clay returned another hour later to get him for dinner, George was still asleep, yet he was wearing the jacket now. Clay frowns a little. Was he feeling sick? Did he feel down after the phone call earlier?

"George," Clay murmurs as he sits on the edge of the bed. He shakes him carefully. "You're starting to worry me... is something wrong?"

George's eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Clay with a slightly bewildered expression before he gradually yawned and sat up. "Don't worry," he murmurs, "I'm just... tired."

"Oh, okay." Clay doesn't push it, because he knew if George had something to say, he would say it. He picks up George's hand in both of his own, but George flinched at his touch. It was as if Clay's touch had electrocuted him or something. "Did I hurt you?" Clay asks before he can stop himself. George shakes his head mutely.

“You should go and be with your family,” George murmurs as he was beginning to pull the sweatshirt Clay gave him off and over his head, “instead of with me in the basement.”

Clay huffs a laugh. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be, George.”

But George didn’t laugh, he just looked at him with an indescribable look. Clay’s laugh fizzled and died into nothing but shallow breaths. He could read George like a book most of the time... what had changed?

This reminded him of that time two years ago when they got in that big fight, and Clay couldn’t read George’s face at all.

“How about we both go up together, hm?” Clay gives his hand a squeeze. George looks at him with a conflicted expression that Clay wished he could know the reason for.

“Okay,” George finally says, and he squeezes Clay’s hand back. Clay sighs in relief. Maybe this was all in his head. Maybe George was just tired.

Dinner was fine aside from the gigantic pile of dishes that followed. Alex didn’t come as he was expected to be at his own family’s house for meals, but he promised to return in the morning much to Anna’s enthusiasm and Tori’s grumbling. Alex also vowed to 1v1 Clay in Minecraft, and idea that Anna and George very much pressured Clay to oblige to.

Clay still felt unsettled with George’s behavior earlier as all throughout dinner, he didn’t say a single word. He finished his meal, picked up everyone’s plates, and brought them right over to the sink. Something was *definitely* wrong. Even when Clay kicked him under the table to get him to look up at him, George didn’t. Did Clay do something wrong?

“Alright, everybody, go get your dancing shoes on!” Clay’s mom says in enthusiasm as she claps her hand together. Her boyfriend, Dan, face-palmed when she wasn’t looking and Clay’s father looked ready to crawl under the dining table. Clay would most certainly join him if he did so.

“Is this all people do in Florida? Go to haunted stores and dance with strangers?” George questions from behind Clay. Clay laughs.

“There you go, George. You hit the nail on the head.”

And then, they went their separate ways as usual. George to the basement and Clay to the top floor. Even though they’d done this a million times before, this time it felt a lot more heavy, and the stairs felt taller and further away from George.

Anna’s idea to ditch this weird dancing party thing to go to a bar was actually a genius one.

Clay caught Anna spam calling Alex, once leaving a message where she said “Mom, come pick me up, I’m scared— the kids are doing lines of cocaine and they’re not giving me any.”

Clay found himself in a suit once again with a pair of slacks and a jacket that were way too thick of material to match the atmosphere of the humid Florida weather. Even in the winter, the heat could fluctuate up to 80 degrees.

And, the icing on the *fucking* cake was that Sofia was here. Of course she was. Why wouldn’t she

be? Clay figured that the presence of his family brought down the age average about sixty years.

In an instant, his family paired off dancing. Anna and Alex danced, Tori and her husband, his mom and Dan, his dad and Carol. The only people left to stand around were Clay, George, and Sofia, who looked at one another with matching expressions. “May I have this dance?” Sofia says with a little laugh as she offers her hand to Clay. Clay gulps and looks to George who was giving him that fake smile he’d memorized by now. *Why are you pushing me away?*

“I think I’ll pa-”

“Oh come on, Clay,” George teases as he pats Clay on the shoulder. “Don’t be a downer. That’s my job. Go, have fun, I’ll watch the twins.”

And that was the end of it. Clay placed his hand in Sofia’s to realize that her hand was so dainty and thin and small and soft. George’s hands weren’t like that; his hands were smaller than Clay’s (they argued about it constantly but Clay was definitely right on this one) but his fingers were calloused and fit just right into Clay’s hand.

He felt his mother’s approving gaze on him, but if anything, that made him feel more angry about the situation at hand. Was this all her plan? He already knew the answer as he looked down at Sofia’s hopeful smile as her hands hooked around his shoulders and pulled them way, way, *way* too close. He could feel her sweet-scented breath on his neck. Clay gulps and tries not to let his hands shake.

“Why did you leave me, Clay?” Sofia whispers into his neck. He feels like he can’t breathe as she pulls her head upward to look up at him. Her hair was so long that it fell onto her back when she leaned her head like that. She was beautiful, yes, but she wasn’t *George*. “Why... did you break up with me?”

Clay’s brows draw together, and he attempts to laugh nervously. “That was a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“But I can’t stop thinking about it,” she insists, and though they were still swaying along the dance floor, Clay felt like hiding somewhere, like crawling under the floorboards. “I’m just wondering what I did wrong.”

“You didn’t!” Clay blurts. Her eyes widen and he clears his throat, “do... anything wrong.”

“Oh,” Sofia whispers, her head darting downward. Their eye contact broke with it, but she was quick to reconnect it. “Why, then?”

He sighs. He remembered a day when he thought he would do anything for her. “It’s complicated,” he answers. Hint: “complicated” was a code word for “George.” What was he supposed to say? That it was *complicated* because he was actually in love with his internet friend at the time and it took him four years and a yellow notebook to realize it?

Sofia actually looks irritated. “Well, you’re single, aren’t you?”

“Actually-”

“You’re not?” Sofia’s eyes widen. “Oh my God, I am *so* sorry, I had no idea! Oh my- I feel so stupid!” She let go of him as if his touch had burned her. “Clay, you’re so funny, why didn’t you say anything?”

Because I’m actually gay and my boyfriend is standing across the room with a pair of demonic children. “I... don’t know,” he says convincingly, “I just... I don’t know, I’m gonna go get some

air.”

He fought his way through the dense, never-ending crowd of rich old couples swaying along the dance floor, leaving Sofia who was calling after him and practically bursting out the back balcony doors. It was dark and cold outside, a temperature he needed to cool down his overheating body and rapid heart rate. That entire time, the atmosphere felt suffocating as he looked into Sofia’s wide, blue eyes and how her hands wandered closer and closer to his face. He wasn’t angry with her, it wasn’t as if she had wronged him in any way; he felt overwhelmed. Sick, even. He wanted to find George, but first, he needed to calm down.

“Clay?”

He looked over to find George already outside with him, leaning on the railing of the balcony, shirt untucked and unbuttoned part way. “Hey,” Clay responds as he edges closer to him. “You didn’t have to let me dance with Sofia, you know,” he says with a soft laugh. He assumed George just went with it to keep up the act of them not dating, but Clay really didn’t want to compromise George’s comfort for a silly game of pretend they had going on. George waved a hand at him dismissively.

“It’s alright,” he murmurs, “really.” Clay didn’t believe him, but it was fine, because out on this balcony it was only the two of them. No mother to push them apart, no sister to scrutinize their every move.

“Wanna dance?” Clay says suddenly. George looks to him with wide eyes.

“What?” he murmurs, clearly questioning if he heard Clay correctly. Clay just grins.

“You heard me, George,” Clay insists, his hand extending to him. “No one can see us out here.” He motions to the wide, arched windows shrouded in tall, billowing curtains that hid the glass of the balcony doors from the view of the inside. George smiles at him a little nervously before he places his hand in Clay’s, and suddenly, life felt a little more right.

George’s hands felt right in his, and having him so close felt just right, too. He loved the gentle squeeze of his hands and how he eventually let go of Clay’s hands to wrap around his middle and sway with him, back and forth.

Clay rests his chin on top of George’s head, and closes his eyes as right now, all that mattered was this; George was here, in his arms, and he knew nothing could break them apart.

Except for George, apparently, who pulled away just a little and looked up at Clay. He took a heavy breath before he spoke, “Clay, I need to tell you something.”

Clay blinks in momentary surprise, about to urge him to go on, but all of a sudden, the door to the balcony swung wide open, and Clay and George sprung apart in an instant but it definitely wasn’t fast enough as the person who stepped outside looked shell-shocked. And the person was-

Sofia?

Her previously perfect makeup had run down her face, mascara and all, her hair a little mused as well. Clay’s jaw drops a little. Oh no. Was that his fault?

“Clay?” Sofia snuffles. Her bright, bloodshot eyes darted between Clay and George. “Are you... are you two..?”

Clay gulps. He opened his mouth to deny out of reflex, but he stopped himself. He looked down at

George, who only looked back from where he stood a good three feet away from him, and in that moment, Clay realized something. He didn't like hiding George at all, and if he really wanted to marry this man, he'd have to start by telling the truth. Clay takes a deep breath before finally, he says the words he should've days ago, "yes, we are. Sofia, this is my boyfriend, George."

"Hi," George says shyly. Sofia gapes at them.

"So you're *gay*?" Sofia whispers as she looks at Clay with raised brows. He nods slowly. No matter how hard he looked at her, Clay couldn't read a single thought going through her head. There was a very long, very uncomfortable silence.

"Does your mom know?" Sofia asks quietly. Clay shakes his head again. "Oh... well, I had... no idea! How long have you been gay for?"

What the- how long have you been-

Suddenly, being gay was like a subscription. Why didn't anyone tell Clay that you could *chose* when and where to be gay?! He had no idea.

"Oh, you know," Clay says, "since I mailed in a request to the gay God to allow me permission on his land."

"It takes time," George pipes in, "it took a few years for mine to process. And you wouldn't believe how they sent in this flying *bitch* named Karen to send me my letter of approval-"

Sofia's face flushes at their clear mockery. "Oh my *God* it was just a simple question. I just wanted to make sure that when *we* were dating, you weren't like- not into me."

George actually laughs aloud and Clay looks at him in complete shock. "Oh, *sweetheart*," George starts, "I was friends with him back then and... hate to break it to you, but you were dating a homo." George looks him dead in the eyes and whispers, "*my* homo."

Clay snorts. Where was this confidence coming from?

"You two really- you're perfect for each other, you know?" Sofia snuffles some more, "you're both *incredibly* immature."

Clay shrugs, "yeah, you're right. We *are* perfect for each other."

They look at each other for a while. The joking atmosphere had evaporated and all that was left was the awkwardness, and for the three to stare at each other. Sofia didn't look too amused.

"Well..." Sofia heaves a sigh, "I'm sorry if I..." she backtracks, "I won't say anything to your mom."

Clay heaves a heavy sigh of relief. "Thank you, Sofia."

"Do you plan on telling her, or-"

"Yeah," Clay blurts. Sofia quiets again. Clay can feel George's eyes on his face, and without another word, Sofia goes out the way she came. She turned around and looked at Clay, really looked at him for maybe the first time in her life, and smiled before she looked to George and said,

"Take care of him, okay?"

George smiles back at her. "I'll try my best."

And then, she shut the door behind her.

Clay didn't have to say anything for George to walk over and hug him silently but tightly, and Clay shakily breathes in and out as he buries his nose in George's hair. "What were you going to say to me earlier?"

"Nothing," George murmurs against his shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

Clay worried about it, but he didn't say anything.

"Clay, what on *Earth* are you doing?"

Clay turned around. He was caught red-handed; the kitchen lights turned on and it had a similar affect as a spotlight being shined on him in the midst of a crime. He was in the kitchen at two in the morning clutching a bag of Lays chips and a bag with a few chocolate chip cookies tucked under his arm while wearing nothing but a Minecraft t-shirt and boxers.

His mother stood in the doorway, her arms crossed and a brow raised. She rubbed her eyes awake from sleep as she must've been woken up from all the noise Clay was making in the kitchen. So, to answer her question of what in the *world* Clay was doing getting a past-midnight snack, he had gotten a text from George that just said "I'm hungry :(" that triggered Clay's protective boyfriend state and thus compelled him to text back with "leave it to me babe >:)" and make him scuttle down the stairs, get a whole meal of snacks and- well, get caught, apparently.

"Uh," he answers intelligibly. *Getting snacks for my boyfriend in the basement.* "I... was hungry."

"Clearly..." his mother sighs and to his own shock, she just shakes her head, "go back upstairs and get to sleep, alright?"

Clay nods.

"You should've just waited until morning, sweetie, you're twenty-four years old."

Clay nods again.

"But you can have those if you're really hungry."

Clay nods *again*. He really, *really* just wanted to go down to the basement and kiss George, it was *killing* him-

"So, go up the stairs, then."

Clay clears his throat. "Like... now?"

"Yes, now," his mother replies, clearly exasperated. And so, Clay sighs, trudges up the stairs, opens his bedroom door, and closes it. Now he was alone with all of these snacks... now he had to text George and explain how he *was* going to be the best boyfriend in the world but his own mother god in the way, *again*.

"Boo."

Clay screeched and dropped the bag of cookies on the floor in utter terror as he turned around to

find the culprit, who was George, laying on his bed and clutching his stomach.

“Clay? Are you alright in there?” Clay’s mom shouts from down the hall.

“Yeah, I’m fine!” he shouts back.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP, I’M TRYING TO SLEEP!” Anna screams back. Clay tried his best to ignore Anna and his mom’s (and eventually Tori’s) screaming match through the wall as he looked at George incredulously, who somehow managed to sneak up here without Clay or George knowing.

“You- how did you get up here?” Clay says as he picks up the dropped cookies from the floor. George grins.

“Magic,” he responds, and though Clay rolls his eyes, he was already tossing the snacks to the other side of the bed and practically leaping onto George, whose shout of surprise was luckily muffled by his siblings and mother, who still were arguing.

“There’s nothing that sets the mood more than your mom fighting with your sisters,” Clay mutters as he rolls over and rolls George over with him so that George could lay on him. George makes a face back at him.

“Mm, sexy.”

Clay snorts at that, “you’re such a weirdo.”

“*Your* weirdo.”

Clay ignores the fact that such a dumb statement brought blush to his cheeks. George clearly noticed as he poked at them with a look of wonderment on his face that just made the red deepen. “Just... shut up and kiss me.”

And he did. Their lips met, and at first, Clay laughed against them, and once George prodded his side in a way that he knew meant *what’s wrong with you, Clay*, Clay just laughed more. George pulls his head back and looks down at him with raised brows. “What’s so funny?” he murmurs in a breathless voice. Clay’s laughter died as he looked up at him, eyes only half-opened and cheeks flushed and hair all messed up.

“Nothing,” Clay murmurs and presses a cheek to the underside of his jaw. “You’re pretty.” He presses another kiss to the side of his neck, and even from there he could feel the heat from George’s face.

“Oh,” George whispers. Clay laughs again, but before he knew it, George was shutting him up with another kiss. They kissed for an indefinite amount of time with lots more giggling and shenanigans. They kissed until he could tell they were both half-asleep, though George kept saying a slurred *no, no, I’m not tired* against his lips between kisses.

Somehow, they wound up with George on his back looking up at Clay through half-lidded eyes and kiss-swollen lips, eyes sparkling in the dim lights. Clay smiled at him, and he smiled back.

They stayed cuddled together for a while, Clay eventually rolling off of him to hug his side, both digging into the snacks and watching some chaotic YouTube videos off of Clay’s laptop in the center of the bed.

“What were you going to say to me earlier?” Clay asks all of a sudden. He cringes at the man on

the screen of a video captioned “zip-lining on Christmas lights.”

George quiets his laughing and sighs a little. “I...”

“You don’t have to say,” Clay starts, but George sighed in determination as he leaned over to pause the video and look down at Clay. Clay’s head fit into his lap as he looked up at him.

“I’m just... worried, I guess.” George’s brows were creased together, and he looked conflicted.

“Why?” Clay asks as he sets down the cookie he’d been eating.

“Because... Clay, it hurts to watch you go through what I went through,” George starts to say, and he looks away from Clay’s eyes to stare at the ceiling. He did that whenever he was lying. “And it would be so much *easier* to just-”

“George,” Clay interrupts, tapping on his chin to get him to look down at him again. How was it that they went from making out to- well, this? “Are you trying to say we should break up..?”

“No!” George blurts. “Well-”

Clay’s eyes widen in horror. “But- George, I love you. And you love me. And it’s been two years.”

“It’s not that simple, Clay-”

“Yes, it is!” Clay sits up and takes George’s hands in both of his. “All relationships are are dedication, love, and trust. That’s it. Three ingredients. Our relationship has two factors: you and me. That’s it. You don’t have to worry about what your mom thinks, or what *my* mom thinks, because it’s just us.”

“Clay, we share the world with 7 billion other people,” George says, “it’s going to be a component.”

“So, what? We bend over and give in?” Clay squeezes his hands, and George looks away again. “I know this isn’t what you really want,” he says in a softer voice. He tries to catch his eyes. “I know this isn’t *you*. Why won’t you just... tell me what’s really wrong?”

He expected George to yell at him, or at least get angry. Because that was what this was, right? A fight?

Instead, George looked at him, and ducked his head. He bit his lip, and in an instant, Clay was letting go of his hands to hold George’s face because he looked like he really wanted to cry. “Hey, hey, don’t cry,” he whispers, “you can talk to me, George. Just talk to me.”

George struggles to make himself meet Clay’s eyes, but when he does, it was clear that he had no fight left in him. He looked like a shell of a being, like someone who was very, very tired.

“I love you,” George whispers weakly, “and you love me. And... that’s all that matters.”

“See? Now you’re getting it.”

George leaned forward until his head was against Clay’s shoulder, and they stayed like that for a long time as the minutes ticked by on Clay’s alarm clock. But, all of a sudden, Clay sparked with an idea.

“Come with me. I have an idea.”

George gave him a skeptical look as Clay's ideas usually ended in disaster, but for once, this one didn't.

Even though it included climbing down from Clay's window and hopping the fence in the side yard and George kept having to cuff up the sweatpants Clay leant him, it was perfect as they ventured deeper into the small forest alongside Clay's mom's house. It was dark and eerie, and the distant dogs barking and tree branches snapping were enough to make them jump every now and then.

"Close your eyes," Clay had told George, and George scowled at him.

"Are you trying to kidnap me?"

"Yup."

Despite their mild bickering, George ended up cupping his hands over his own eyes while Clay took hold of his shoulders and steered him around any obstacles.

"Alright... open them."

George lifted the hands from his own eyes, and gasped.

The otherwise dark forest was filled with fireflies that appealed to the muggy Florida weather, even in the winter.

"Clay, this is... maybe the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

George's eyes were filled with light, and Clay had a hard time focusing on the fireflies and not him.

"It's like a 3-D night sky," George says in wonder as he cups a firefly delicately in his hands. One got caught in his hair, and another had landed on his shoulder.

"See? The stars really are yellow," Clay murmurs as he remembered the time they went star-gazing from on top of their sprinter van, George tucked in his arms, and how Clay sang "Yellow" by Coldplay to him.

"I guess they are," George had said, and he smiled so brightly at him that it was brighter than the fireflies themselves.

Clay wished he had the ring with him because he was so ready to get on one knee and propose to this man.

But he waited. He waited until they walked home and climbed back up to his room, until they shoved their secret snack stash back under Clay's bed and settled into the blankets, and kissed some more until the beginnings of early morning sunlight seeped into Clay's room.

Eventually, after half-asleep kisses and murmurings of childhood stories, George fell asleep in his bed, wearing Clay's hoodie, bathed in the colors of the sunrise. It wasn't surprising that they managed to stay up the whole night *again*.

So, despite the underlying worry of what was worrying George so much, Clay kissed George's forehead and fell asleep beside him.

that one scene with George telling Clay they should break up reminds me of "Rewrite the Stars" from The Greatest Showman

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

angst chapter woooo

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George

On any other day of maybe his life, waking up was a somewhat pleasant experience. Though waking up before the sun was a horrid occurrence that absolutely *no one* should have to endure, he usually woke up to Clay gently shaking him, sometimes holding a cup of coffee for him to down to try and feel a little more alive. Other times, he made his way to the kitchen to find Clay making breakfast for the two of them. But, George's favorite was when they both woke together with nowhere to go and no reason to get up from bed.

This morning didn't follow *any* of those usual options because most of the time, a borderline homophobic mother knocking on the door wasn't a component.

"Clay? Are you still asleep? It's almost one in the afternoon..."

George opened his eyes slowly to hear the knocking on the door enough to realize that he had fallen asleep in Clay's bed. He was supposed to go back down to the basement, but there had been a change in plans as soon as he fell asleep here. No matter what explanation they could pull out of their asses, there was no explanation; George was in his underwear aside from the hoodie he had on, and Clay was dressed similarly.

"Clay? Can I come in?"

George shakes Clay awake in a panic as he mutely points to the door. His sleepy boyfriend gives him a wide-eyed, half-awake look before he appeared to process what was happening, return to his senses and burst out of bed. "Just a second, Mom!" Clay trips his way into a pair of sweatpants that had been on the floor and opens the nearest hiding spot, which happened to be a closet— *seriously, again? This joke was really getting old...* that George immediately threw himself into and shut the door behind him.

Through the muffle of the closet doors, George listened to Clay's bedroom door open. The closet was dark and mostly empty as it was only filled with the clothes Clay had brought for the trip, which was fantastic as it made it much easier to navigate away from the doors in case his luck as bad as it usually was lately.

"Did you stay up late again?" Clay's mother's voice comes muffled through the doors.

"Just a little," Clay lies. "I'm just trying to sleep in as much as possible before I go back to regularly working, y'know?"

His mother doesn't sound very convinced given the humming sound she makes in response, but if she didn't believe him, she didn't say anything about it. "Oh. Well, I was just wondering where George is."

On cue, George pushed himself against what he *thought* was the wall, but apparently wasn't as it fell on top of him with a loud *thump*. He cringed because of *course* right when Clay's mother questions his whereabouts, he just *had* to push against an unstable bin that fell onto the floor.

"What was that?"

Clay clears his throat uncomfortably. "Rats?" he answers. Oh no. They were really done for now. George's heart sank as he heard footsteps padding closer and closer to the doors of his hiding spot, and in the split second he had to get his shit together, he crawled as far to the end as he could, thankful to find an old dresser at the end. Crawling into its cabinet was more than a bit of a squeeze, but he managed to fit himself into it with a good amount of clambering just as soon as Clay's mother opened the doors. George gulps and doesn't move a muscle, yet he still hears an almost missable scuttling sound beside him to see:

A fucking *rat*.

George nearly screamed, but he clasped both hands over his mouth as he looked at the thing. It was big even for a rat, its tail long and partially in the shadows. He clasped both hands over his mouth and silently accepted his fate as he currently had his knees hugged to his chest just to fit in this dresser in the first place.

After some more muffled talking and scuttling beside him of the rat, he finally heard the door close and Clay peak his head into the closet and say "George?"

George didn't wait another moment as he practically burst out of the dresser, crawled out of the closet and hugged Clay's legs from where he was kneeled on the floor.

"Oh my God," George whispers, his heart still racing. "Never, *never* make me go in there again."

Clay just laughs at him. "Noted. Now come on, I told my mom you were out jogging, so..."

George sighs. First, he deals with rats. Now he has to exercise?

Christmas Eve really sucked so far.

Even after returning to Clay's house after a pretend run and watching Alex and Anna scream in agony while trying to gang up on Clay in Minecraft, the worry didn't leave George's system. The big Christmas Eve party was that night, the night that all the buzz had been about. And he couldn't stop *worrying*.

He was well aware that this was supposed to be the best time of the visit as Clay's mother had been working away in the kitchen all day and even Clay's father contributed by making expert cocktails for everyone (except Anna and Alex, who were still technically underaged) to enjoy. Many people were coming over to enjoy the gift exchange, including Sofia and her family (awkward) and a list that thankfully included Alex's family as well.

But, even as George tried to focus on his tasks to set the table, to turn on the Christmas tree lights, to help Clay's dad with the cocktails or to give Clay's mom an opinion on the salad dressing she was making, he couldn't get it out of his head: his interaction with Tori.

Stay away from him.

George felt selfish. Part of him screamed at himself to just *tell* Clay. They could work it out

together. But the thing is, he knew how Clay would react. Clay would sympathize with George and take out his anger on Tori. As well-deserved as this might be, George knew that this large family reunion was Clay's mother's attempt to bring the family back together as she went as far as to bring her divorced husband and his fiancé into it. This was supposed to be a family gathering to rebuild the bond that had faded over the years.

George wasn't part of this family, and he decided that meant he shouldn't be part of this equation. He shouldn't get in the way of Clay and his family, and telling him the truth would do exactly that. But if he removed himself entirely... there would be no family squabbles, no sibling rivalries. Only love, and Christmas spirit.

This mindset aside, he couldn't let go of Clay. Clay was his *everything*. Clay had been his everything for so long that George felt like he didn't know himself without him. They were best friends and in love all at once. They had an inseparable bond that nothing was supposed to break.

George would never forget this one perfect night. The night after he returned from his months abroad in Britain and away from Clay, and how when he saw Clay across the airport they practically sprinted to each other and George jumped on him and Clay caught him and it was *perfect*. But that night, they laid together in Clay's bed, cuddled together, basking in the touch of each other as it felt so *real* and so *warm* as opposed to the FaceTimes they had to revert to over the long distance.

"You're my soulmate," Clay had said as he tangled their hands together. "I felt like since the day I saw you in that game store in New York there was something just... *there*."

George didn't have the heart to tease him because he agreed, as sappy as it was. "You're my soulmate," George had responded with a kiss to the back of Clay's hand, "and like it or not, you're not getting rid of me, any time soon."

Understandably, George couldn't let his soulmate go so easily because he *needed* him.

And that's why he felt selfish as he watched once again from the doorway of the kitchen, leaned against the empty doorframe as he watched Clay and Tori laughing and making icing for cookies. Clay leaned over and pressed a dollop of it to her cheek and Tori squawked at him and for a moment, they looked like real siblings, not adults who were just trying to get by.

"Hey, George! Wanna help me decorate this?" Clay asks, face flushed with laughter and dollop of frosting swiped on his cheek.

George gulps and looks at Tori, then back at Clay. *Stay away from him*. "Oh... that's okay. I think your mom wanted my help with the flowers, anyway."

The lie slipped off his tongue before he could take it back, and he tried to ignore the crease of confusion in Clay's brow as he looked at him.

But, before Clay could convince him otherwise, George turned his back to him and bit his tongue to refrain from saying what he wanted to say.

It's for his own good, he told himself. *This is for his own good*.

It was becoming harder and harder to believe.

The next moment that he and Clay managed to get alone together didn't turn out like George hoped

it would. Over the past few days, the moments spent alone with Clay were usually the ones spent being tugged into closets or behind corners for just a few moments to be kissed breathless and get as much of each other as possible before going back into the world around them, but this stolen moment wasn't like the others.

George didn't even realize Clay was behind him until he heard the door shut, and he whirled around to, surely enough, find Clay the culprit of shutting the door to the basement. George was standing in the bedroom assigned to him, in the midst of pulling his shirt over his head to change into something fancier to wear for the party. "Oh, hello there," George says as he grins and loops his tie around his neck before he makes his way over to Clay, who hadn't moved from his place in front of the door. "What's up?" George asks gingerly.

"You tell me," Clay says. He had his arms crossed. George gulps, about to deny, but Clay holds up a hand to stop him. "Don't deny it," he interrupts, and he takes a cautious step closer to his boyfriend. "I know that something's wrong. I can see it in your face." He places his hands on either side of George's face and looks down at him. "George, *please*, I'm begging you. Just tell me what's wrong."

George gulps, and makes himself look up at him. *Tell him. Just tell him.* But he can't. He has to remind himself of Tori's threat, and even if they pretended to separate, it wouldn't matter, because the anger would be there; Clay would come out to his family immediately after and George would be the thief of the moment Clay had been waiting for for years, the moment Clay would get to come out to his parents and sister. But George had already screwed up the coming out to his sister part.

"I..." George felt like he was dying inside with every lie he told him. "I *can't*, Clay."

Clay drooped. "Is there something I did wrong?" he whispers. George shakes his head. "Do you not love me anymore?"

George made a big mistake, because he hesitated. Clay's eyes widened. "No! No, Clay, it's not that-"

"Then why did you hesitate?"

Because maybe it's better this way. "I- I don't know, but Clay, I love you, it's just-"

"Are you cheating on me?"

That question left a bitter taste in his mouth. He pulled his own face from Clay's hands and looked at him in utter disbelief. "*Cheating* on you?" George laughed bitterly. "You think I'm- Clay, are you serious?"

Clay sighs. "I don't *know* George, but you keep pushing me away. Since a few days ago, you've been all *weird*. So can you really blame me for jumping to conclusions like that?"

"I can, actually," George snaps back, "I'd never- do you seriously think that lowly of me?"

"George, you know I love you-"

"Well, you know I love you!"

"Then why did you hesitate?"

"Because maybe I shouldn't, Clay!"

They both froze after that. George let out a shaky breath.

“Shouldn’t *what*, George?” Clay whispers. They look into each other’s eyes with fear. Fear of each other.

“I don’t-”

“Shouldn’t *what*,” Clay repeats, but his tone was hard. Cold. Demanding the truth.

“Maybe I shouldn’t love you,” George says. He said it like it was a statement, and not a lie.

“Maybe it would be better if we just-”

“This again? Seriously?” Clay pinched the skin between his brows. He was getting into that stage where no matter what George said, it would irritate him. So George stayed quiet. “You were saying this last night, and you’re saying it again. Why can’t you just *tell* me if you don’t want to date me anymore?”

Because I can’t lie that much to you. George broke eye contact, because he was so sick of looking at the fiery look in Clay’s eyes. “Just go get ready for the party,” George mutters, slinking down to sit on the creaky basement bed. “I’ll see you upstairs.”

Clay’s jaw clenched, and his arms uncrossed. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Closing me out again?”

George just sighs in response.

“Whatever, George. *Don’t* tell me the truth, keep lying to me, keep running away from yourself. See if I *fucking* care.”

Oh. That hurt. George pretended like it didn’t. “See if I *fucking* care if you just leave.”

Clay’s brows raised at him. “I’ll keep that in mind, George.” He stormed from the room, just like George had asked him to. There was no kiss to his head, no soft “I love you, idiot” that he usually received or said when they parted ways. Nothing but bitter silence that he sentenced himself to.

He didn’t cry, but everything felt broken, like the walls of a sanctuary had crumbled in and left him with broken bones and a shattered spirit. He was holding a crushing dilemma of selfishness or selflessness that he was already growing weary of, because every step away from Clay was a step closer to breaking this soulmate bond that was *supposed* to be unbreakable.

So, George did the only thing he could think of in that moment.

He dialed Nick’s number with shaking hands.

“*You’re an idiot, George.*”

“I know.”

“*You know he loves you, right?*”

“Well... I think I’m making him love me a little less.”

“Really? You’re seriously so stupid. It’s just like that time right before you guys started dating, and Clay thought he was straight and you thought he hated you and you guys got in this big stupid fight just because you couldn’t actually admit how you were feeling to each other.”

“I feel like it’s a little more complicated than that now.”

“You’re still both being idiots. Look, Clay isn’t mad at you. He’s pushing you away because you’re pushing him away.”

“...I guess so, but he genuinely sounded really mad.”

“He gets mad when he’s really worried about something. And he’s really worried about you, so he’s frustrated that he can’t help you.”

“What am I supposed to do, though?”

“I don’t know, tell him the fuckin’ truth?”

“But it’ll-”

“Tear him away from his family, blah blah blah. His mom is a dickhead, his sister sounds like a bitch. I’d say you’re doing him a favor.”

“But-”

“George, he really loves you.”

“How do you know?”

“I just- do. Look, talk to him, and I’ll get to say I told you so in a few days.”

“O...kay. Thanks for calling me, Sap, but I think I need to get upstairs to the party.”

“Alright. Talk to him, George. Don’t be stupid.”

“I’ll try not to me.”

“I love you, man. Don’t let Tori get in your head.”

“I love you too, Sap. I’ll try not to.”

George hung up the call, and took a look at himself in the mirror.

It was nice to know that he looked like less of a mess on the outside than he was in the inside.

George hardly made it out of the door of the basement before bad luck slapped him in the face again.

He hardly caught a glimpse of Clay, handsome as ever in his suit, hair fixed up from its previous bedhead and green eyes gleaming in the sparkling lights of the Christmas tree. Clay looked over at him, and his eyes didn’t twinkle as much. His smile faded. George gulped and looked away.

He busied himself by making his way down the hall and dodging all eyes before a hand clamped around his wrist. A cold, boney hand that didn’t belong to Clay.

In an instant, George looked up to see Tori, whose eyes were wild and narrowed and unkind. The entire air around her felt cold and miserable, but George was honestly so tired and worn down at this point that he couldn't find it in himself to shiver.

"You had your chance, George," she whispers. George feels like he can't breathe as his hands quiver at his sides. She still had an iron grip on his wrist, and his entire body screamed at him to run through that front door and never turn back. "You had your chance, and you ignored me."

"Tori," George starts, "you don't have to do this. Please. You can't do this to him." He wanted to scream. He wanted to *scream*. Clay could be mad at him, Clay could break his heart, and George would still defend him to the grave. Because Clay was his *soulmate*. And soulmates made sacrifices for each other. Consider this George's offering.

"Have to," Tori whispers. "I'm going to tell them. And there's *nothing* you can do about it."

What made it terrible was the fact that if George leaned around the corner enough, he could see Clay and the rest of the family, just a few steps down the hall. Laughing and drinking in the Christmas spirit.

But George was trapped in this horrible paradox where his only thought was *well, fuck*.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of people have been asking me how I update so quickly, and here's my answer if you're interested!

Writing is my passion, and it has been since I was really little. So, for the first time in a while, I've finally gotten the motivation to write consistently, every day. Even though I'm in school and I have way too much homework to technically have the time to do this, I really am determined to get out these updates. So, there you have it!

I'd also like to thank everyone who reads and comments, and leaves Kudos! Thank you so much, you guys are the reason why I can update so often! You give me so much inspiration to continue writing <3

Btw, the vibe of this chapter is "Bags" by Clairo :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I'd like to formally accept my fate of my readers screaming at me in the comments after this chapter

Clay

On New Years Day one year ago, Clay woke up to a cold bed and fresh snow falling outside his window.

A few steps into the kitchen revealed Nick asleep on the couch and the remnants of a big party scattered around the apartment, but Clay only had the energy to stumble into the kitchen, get some food in his system, and call George.

He wouldn't forget how peaceful and quiet the world seemed outside as today was the dawn of a new day, a new year.

Clay picked up his phone to see a single notification marking a text from George where he only wrote "can you call me?"

Delivered four hours ago. Clay had been sleeping.

George was in Britain with his family and had flown out early on the previous day. He insisted that it was time he went to see them. Clay didn't try to talk him out of it as he knew George was determined to make everything right, so Clay let him go with the promise to be here for him, even if he was an ocean away.

Clay immediately dialed George's number, hoping everything was alright as usually, George left an array of messages of what he did that day and asking about Clay; for that to be the only text was very, very concerning.

"Clay?" George whispered over the phone. Clay's heart sank.

"Hey, George... how are you doing?"

The only response was a shaky breath over the line. Clay gulped.

"George?"

There was still no response. Clay took his phone from his ear to check that he hadn't hung up by accident but, surely enough, the call was ongoing with the seconds ticking by to prove it. "You're scaring me... what's wrong?" He's sure to ask this carefully, but all he can hear is muffled sniffing on the other end. He could also hear muffled voices, and knocking on the door. His brows creased together.

"Talk to me," he eventually pleads.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," George whispers into the phone shakily, "I shouldn't have- come here, or

bothered you, I shouldn't have--"

"George, shh, shh," Clay says back. He tried to sound as calm as possible even though his voice was trembling with worry. He could tell by the shake of George's voice that something was very, very wrong. "Take some deep breaths for me, alright?"

"Clay, I f-feel like I can't breathe," George whispered back, "they won't leave me alone, I wish they'd just--"

"You're okay," Clay murmurs, "don't think about them right now. Focus on just breathing and then we can talk about what's wrong, okay?"

The other end was silent for a few seconds before George finally responds with "okay."

For a while, Clay talks George through it: he distracts him by telling him about how Patches curled up in George's sweatshirt because she clearly missed him, or about how Clay beat Nick's team in BedWars. Clay probably talked to him for over a half hour, for all of which, George was mostly silent, but Clay knew he was listening. And, once George's voice was shaking as much and he could breathe properly, George finally told him what was wrong.

"My parents won't let it go," George had told him, "and I thought they would. I was willing to accept that they weren't okay with me being gay but I guess I was stupid enough to think they'd care enough to just not talk about it. But it's all they'll talk about. It's like they want to fix me or something..."

"You weren't stupid," Clay reassured him. He silenced as an urge for George to keep talking.

"I feel like I'm always suffocating when I'm here... like I can't relax, even if I'm alone in my room. But at the same time I feel like I can't leave because I'd be leaving Charlie and Janice..."

"George, they'll understand," Clay insists. He knew that George needed to get out of there, but he needed to coax him into that conclusion or else this would never work.

"What if they won't, Clay?"

"They will," he says with more determination, more steel to his tone. George's siblings were very accepting of him. He knew they would understand, especially because they must've seen the way their parents had been treating their brother.

"And it just makes me think- what if... what if the rest of the world is like this?"

Clay froze at that.

"Outside our friend group, of our apartment... the rest of the world hates us. Just because we're together."

"Yeah," Clay whispers, "I know."

"But I guess that makes us stronger, right?"

Clay laughed a little at that. "What, are you saying that makes us better than all the straight people?"

Clay's heart lifts to hear George laugh back. "Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying."

They sat in a comfortable silence for a few moments before Clay blurted what had been on his

mind for a while. "George, have you ever thought that this is because of me?"

"What do you mean?"

He takes a breath, "that maybe your parents wouldn't be so hard on you if I just... wasn't part of the picture?"

George inhaled sharply. "Clay, you better not be saying that-

"I know, I know. But you can't deny that it's true... that if I wasn't here, they would be easier on you."

There was silence. This time it wasn't as comfortable.

"You're really stupid, you know."

Clay's brows raised in surprise. "What?"

"You think that- Clay, I would be so much worse off if it wasn't for you. You're the only person in the *world* I could imagine myself with."

Clay felt his cheeks heat. He suddenly felt pretty stupid for suggesting such a thing as he realized all of these feelings were mutual.

"If it wasn't for you, I'd probably be under a bus right now, or something-

Clay laughed, genuinely.

"So... don't ever say that again."

"Isn't there something else you want to say to me?" Clay prods cheekily.

"What?" *George replies innocently.*

"A certain three words..?"

"You're the worst?"

"That's technically four words, George-"

"No, it's not! It counts as one!"

"How would you know? You're colorblind!"

"What the fuck does that have to do with it?!"

Despite the bickering that ensued for the next few minutes over whether or not "you're" counts as one or two words, George finally whispered,

"I love you, Clay."

"That's still four words."

It's a good thing that killing people over the phone wasn't possible, because Clay would certainly be dead by now.

Even if that New Years Eve had been a tough time for George, Clay coaxed him into booking

himself a flight for the next day, where Clay awaited him with open arms.

How was it that that had been them a year ago, that Clay had been the one to tell George that being apart would be easier, and now they had flipped sides?

How was it that they were as close as could be one day, and fighting the next?

They *never* fought. Never.

Clay didn't know what to do with himself. But he felt like he was suffocating from the moment he walked away from the basement, from the moment he walked into the Christmas Eve party filled with people talking and laughing. It felt so cruel of the world to act so normal, as if his entire world wasn't caving in. Clay even felt *angry* that the world kept spinning and didn't stop like he felt it should.

However, life was even more cruel than he anticipated as he stood in the center of a decked-out living room, champagne flute in his hand and smiling mother introducing him to her friends as her "star son", a term he'd never grown fond of. Especially now that he was expected to smile left and right to play along with the charade.

He looked around to find that the room was filling with more and more strangers shaking his hands and asking what his plans were for the future where he was supposed to reply with more than *I don't know* or *mind your fucking business*, and there was still no sign of George. Should he go talk to him? Was there anything left to say?

See if I fucking care if you just leave.

That was the last thing George had said to him. Clay clenched his jaw. It was decided, then. George could mope around, and Clay wouldn't look for him. He felt a chill run down his spine at the mere remembrance of the blank look in George's eyes when he'd spat that last insult at him. He didn't even recognize him.

Once Clay watched Sofia's family walk through the front door, he decided that enough was enough, and he was going to hide up in his room for a few moments before he could officially face the world down here, and after pushing past the people huddled in the living room and setting his untouched champagne in Alex's hand, he stepped into the still-crowded hallway and rounded the corner where he knew the stairs were. He exhaled in relief. He managed to slip away from the party without his mother noticing, which was something of a miracle.

"Tori, you don't have to do this," came a sudden, pleading voice from around the other corner. Clay's eyes widened as he could recognize that soft voice and accent from anywhere. George? "Please. You can't do this to him."

"Have to," came another voice, harsh and not as quiet as George's voice. Tori? "I'm going to tell them. And there's *nothing* you can do about it."

Clay's brows crease together. Why were George and Tori scheming in the middle of a Christmas party? And what were they even *talking* about?

Who was this "he"? And who was "them"? What did Tori know that George didn't want her to?

Was this related to why George had been so down the past few days?

Refusing to jump to any more conclusions, Clay stepped out from his hiding place behind the wall

and into the unoccupied dining room aside from these two, his arms folded and brows raised. The two looked at him like two deer in headlights.

“What the hell is going on here?” Clay asks in an impatient voice as his eyes dart between Tori and George, who looked equally terrified.

“Clay,” George starts, and Clay looked at him with a tired expression, yet Tori interrupted.

“I know,” she starts. Her eyes looked crazy, and *wild*, “I know about you two. I know you’re dating. I know you’re gay, and I know George is too.”

Oh.

Oh.

Clay’s jaw drops. He couldn’t even process. His brain froze and refused to think out of self defense, simply because the truth was too painful. The first thing to understand was that Tori knew, and she didn’t sound too accepting about it. She sounded devious, like this was a piece of knowledge to add to her arsenal of things against Clay. The second thing to understand was that George knew this, and must’ve for a while as the news of Tori knowing about the two of them didn’t seem to have much shock value to him. But why didn’t George *say* anything?

Was it because he didn’t trust Clay? Because he was already planning on breaking up with him?

Or was it because of something else Clay didn’t know?

But then, he suddenly recalled the conversation he’d walked in on in the first place. George begging Tori not to tell anyone, pleading and saying *you can’t do this to him* when Tori replied that she was going to out Clay to the whole family.

“And you knew?” Clay asks George. He felt numb, like he couldn’t get a single other thought across his brain other than the million alarms going off.

George visibly gulps before he nods slowly. Clay just felt *sick*. “Why were you keeping this from me?” Clay snaps. George flinches.

“Well-”

“I told him to stay away from you,” Tori says with a small sigh, “for your own *good*.”

“You told George to stay away from me?” Clay says, voice sharp and unforgiving as he whirls to Tori. His tie suddenly felt too tight. He felt like he was suffocating again. “Why would you- and you probably threatened him, didn’t you? Told him to stay away from me or else you’d tell the whole family that we’re both gay? That’s it, isn’t it?”

Tori’s brows raise, and what was on her lips could almost be defined as a smile. “Wow, hit the nail on the head, Clay. Way to go.” Her upturned lips drooped into an ugly frown.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Clay lashes at her, his heart feeling as if it was on *fire*. “What the *fuck* made you think it’s okay to blackmail my boyfriend?! You- oh, you *really* make me sick-”

“It’s not my fault you decided to bring your little boytoy home for a family gathering!” Tori retorts in the same, loud voice. “It’s not my fault that you decided it would be fun to be even more unique and *fun* by being gay-”

Clay barks a laugh. “Wow, Tori! You’re so smart! You discovered my secret! That I *decided* to be gay because I thought it would make me more *fun* of a person! The only person who would have to fake a sexuality is *you*, Tori, because you’re so *fucking* boring!”

Clay feels a gentle hand tug on his arm and murmur, “hey, Clay, c’mon, let’s just go to dinner.”

“At least I’m not a self-glorifying asshole!” Tori shouts back, “who thinks he can just *waltz* in and earn approval every corner he turns! Clay, you just don’t understand what it’s like for people to actually be honest with you!”

“What, are you mad that you didn’t get enough *attention* from Mom and Dad when you were a little kid?—”

“Clay!”

Clay actually snaps from his daze at the voice shouting at him, and the hand tugging at his arm. He silenced and looked to his side to see George, staring at him with a determined expression and lip caught between his teeth. He held Clay’s bicep firmly. “This is exactly why I didn’t say anything,” George starts. “I didn’t want to get between you and your family, don’t you see? And look, you’re tearing each other apart.”

Clay blinked as he looked at George, who was selfless and perfect and his soulmate, begging for mercy on Tori’s behalf, even after everything she put him through. After everything *Clay* put him through. He suddenly felt like the worst person in the world. He needed to apologize to him, but right now, he couldn’t think. “George,” he says gently, “that’s not your problem to worry about. It’s not your fault that Tori is a fucking *asshole*.”

George opens his mouth to likely counter that point, but a knock on the side of the doorframe beats him to it.

They all whirled around, wide-eyed and extremely guilty looking to find Anna standing there with a highly concerned expression. “Dinner’s ready,” she says awkwardly. Clay sighs heavily. “I won’t even ask what’s going on here,” Anna says slowly, “but Tori, don’t be a prick, alright?”

“Oh, I won’t.”

Clay didn’t believe her. He reached out and gripped her wrist, hard, as he fought to catch her eyes.

“Do this,” he hisses, “and I’ll *never* forgive you.”

“I’ll never forgive you for what you did to me,” Tori hisses back as she rips her stone-cold hand from his grasp. All of a sudden, Clay felt like his entire body went limp as he couldn’t move another muscle. He looked at Tori, who was clearly angry, and Anna, who was confused yet still siding with him, and George, who was only looking at Clay with a worried, sweet expression.

What did he do to Tori?

He didn’t let himself elaborate on that thought. He let George gently push him towards the kitchen, filled with sound and laughter that made Clay feel smaller and smaller and further away from the man beside him that he had been so set on marrying.

Right now, he felt void of all feeling other than dread as sitting at his designated dining room chair felt like a death sentence. He felt like the walk to this long table filled with food and strangers was a walk to the guillotine. The walk to his very demise.

Under the table, he felt a hand entwine around his, and squeeze gently. Clay looked to the side enough to realize it was George, with a pained smile and a tired look in his eyes.

Clay squeezed his hand back, even if he didn't know how he felt.

He watched as slowly, each seat at the table was filled and the chatter faded to silence as Clay's mother stood at the head of the table with her wine glass raised in toast. She was smiling brightly, completely oblivious to her own son at the end of the table who thought his shattering heart would be enough to stab him from the inside and kill him. She wore a string of pearls that he had never seen on her before.

"Here's a toast to Christmas," she says in cheerful voice, "and to family."

How ironic.

"To family!" everyone around the table cheers, and raises their glass. Clay didn't raise his glass.

No one noticed, thankfully. Aside from his mother, who caught his eyes from across the table and gave him a worried look as she sipped her wine. He watched as when she set the glass down, her expensive lipstick left a stain on the rim. She really was a stranger now.

"I have a toast," Tori says suddenly as she raises her glass before everyone sat to commence the meal. She stood, and raised up her wine glass, untouched and unsuspecting of what was yet to come. Clay could feel his heartbeat in his eyes, and he felt his blood run cold. He could hardly feel George squeezing his hand in a weak attempt to comfort him, and he really considered screaming to cut her off. But he felt frozen, and helpless. He watched as the light of his future was caught in Tori's cold hands, refusing to let go.

"A toast for Clay, specifically," Tori says. Her colorless, beady eyes meet his across the table, accompanied with everyone else's in the room. He could tell George was looking down.

They felt like stones being pelted at them, a reality for others in their shoes. A reality they shouldn't have to face for who they love, but that was the world they lived in. The world Tori belonged to.

And so Clay bowed his head, and gave in. There was no point in screaming, in crying, in begging her to keep quiet, because everyone was going to find out. There was no opportune moment, no time better than another to tell his parents the truth, because the reaction would be the same. The pale, heartless smiles, the cold pats to the back, the silent disowning of him as their son that was yet to come inevitably.

So he bowed his head, and accepted his fate.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

just a mini chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tori

When all eyes on the table focused on Tori and her raised wine glass, she felt as if time froze to allow her time to think. For once, the spotlight was on her, and she was blinded by the light and glory of it all; but there was no warmth with the light, and no satisfaction from the attention fixated on her. In fact, she felt nearly nothing at all.

She expected to feel herself inflated with pride that finally, *she* would be the favorite child. She would be the one who made her parents proud.

But she didn't feel that at all.

She looked at her brother's face, and the shadow that had fallen over it. He didn't fight it. Instead, he had completely given up, and something about that made her heart sink. She had expected Clay to make a scene, to scream and shout and pull at her hair and beg her not to expose his big secret. She felt sick for wishing that would happen. But instead, he stood there, weakly clutching George's hand for support.

Tori's eyes flickered to George, who she was shocked to find meet her gaze. He didn't look angry, not majorly, anyway. He just looked worried, for Clay.

At this point, she felt like she was a kid again, that age when Clay was just a few months past being a baby and now was into the era of being a toddler; the age when Tori used to take his favorite stuffed animal and dangle it above his head where he would reach and grab for it until he wailed and her mother scolded her.

But they weren't kids anymore, and this wasn't a game. And this time, their mother wouldn't scold Tori. She'd scold Clay for crying, in this analogy.

But George had that look on his face, the look on his face Tori discovered when she found him on the phone with his mother.

I don't want him to go through what I did, George had said to Tori when she first told him about her discovery.

I don't want his own family to turn on him like mine.

She then thought to what George had shouted at at his own mother: *you don't get to be sorry!*

Tori gulped.

Finally, her mind tortured her with one last memory:

If you do this, I'll never forgive you.

She believed Clay on that one. She could still feel how Clay's hand had gripped her wrist as he said that to her, hissing with something pleading buried in his voice.

If she did this, for just a brief moment of false pride, she would lose her relationship with Clay forever. Anna would turn on her as she had always been a better person than Tori anyway, and her parents would forget about her as they always did.

Tori had become the villain.

It's not too late, was what George's eyes said. *You don't have to do this.*

And then the world unfroze, and Tori was blinded back to life.

The people staring at her expectantly, Clay hanging his head and waiting for the blow to come, George squeezing his hand as if they were about to go on the drop of a rollercoaster. In a way, they were.

"Clay," Tori starts. Clay wouldn't look at her, even when George nudged him gently. Even as she spoke, she didn't know where the words would take her. Her hands lightly shook from how tightly she gripped the wine glass. "I just want to say that..."

In a quick motion, she felt a tiny hand wrap around her own, and she looked down to see Cecilia, her own daughter holding her fingers tightly in her small, chubby hand. She really did have Clay's eyes. But she smiled brightly at her and said, "go on, Mommy!" She earned a polite chuckle from the table.

Tori tore her eyes from her daughter to meet her brother's eyes. "I just want to say that I'm grateful for you." *She was?* "I know we... haven't always gotten along, but I'm glad we could all be together for Christmas."

Maybe *glad* was a stretch, but it was true. She knew that much as Cecilia gave her hand a squeeze as people raised their glasses and clinked them accordingly, but as she met Clay's eyes, all she could see was one thing within them: *thank you*.

Yet, the peace was interrupted once again.

"While I have your attention," came a new, deeper, louder voice, "I'd like to say something. Something I need to address *now*."

Tori's eyes flicker to the end of the table, near the head, where her mother stood with a very pained smile. Turns out, it was her mother's own boyfriend, Dan, who had spoken. Tori looked over to him wearily, only to find that he held his wine glass and remained standing. Her mother looked to Dan with an irked expression as she murmured "*Dan, do you need to say this right now? In front of the guests?*" but he ignored her.

Instead, he stared right at Clay.

Tori gulps.

It was unmistakable as his dark eyes locked onto him, like a hunter locking onto its prey. Cecilia's hand tightens around Tori's, and she can't help but squeeze her daughter's hand back. This wasn't part of the plan. The guests all around the table looked irritated as they had been denied the right to sit and eat twice now, and Dan seemed to be staring Clay down, analyzing him.

Clay actually looked afraid now, caught off guard as before, he had been anticipating Tori's words. But now, Dan was the new villain.

She didn't know whose side she was on, but she knew enough to realize that this was going to go very, very badly.

Chapter End Notes

no one:

me: *resolves a cliff hanger with another cliff hanger*

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

warning!! mentions of the f-slur!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George

Powerlessness had to be the worst existing feeling. Worse than guilt or sadness, in George's opinion.

There was nothing quite as terrible as staring pain right in the face and only having the ability to bow your head and let it wash over you. Except, fate twisted that knife into a far worse outcome.

George had to watch *Clay* have the biggest pain of his life wash over him, and all he could do was hold his hand.

Despite the fact that George really couldn't have done or do more than this, he still felt guilty. Maybe he should've warned Clay about *Tori*, or at least told *Anna* about it, but he didn't. Maybe he should have never come here in the first place. None of that mattered, though, because they had been caged to be in the situation they currently found themselves trapped within.

George had to admit, he was shocked by *Tori's* words. He fully expected her to say the fateful sentence, the terrible exposure to his boyfriend and himself, and he was bracing himself for impact from the moment she lifted her wine glass.

Even if they dodged that bullet, another was shot their way. A blow that no one prepared for. Including the poor guests who were just trying to get some good food and go their happy way.

From the instant *Dan* said he had something to address and very pointedly stared at *Clay*, George felt the grip around his hand tighten. He felt as if his throat was closing up, as if his vision was tunneling on *Dan* and whatever urgent matter it was he had to address this instant.

But George was completely powerless.

"Clay," *Dan* starts, his hand clutched hard around his glass. He didn't raise the glass in toast. That somehow made what was yet to come far more ominous. His eyes were steeled on *Clay* from the head of the table. George nearly squeezed his eyes shut, because maybe if he didn't *watch*, it would hurt less. "Would you like to tell us all about your *boyfriend*?"

No one breathed.

No one even *blinked*.

The eyes that had all been fixated on *Clay* jumped around the room. There were murmurings, but all George heard was a soft ringing in his ears; a similar sound to when a loud explosion sounds, a big booming sound at a great enough volume to create aftershocks. It felt as if *Dan's* words set off explosions, and George was listening to the aftereffects.

But the shot wasn't finished being fired, apparently.

"It's interesting, Clay, because you never said anything to your mother or I," Dan continues on, "so I thought you might want to talk about it now that all the attention is on you, right?"

George's eyes flickered over to Clay for just a second. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't *breathe*. Clay's eyes were blown wide, and in his shock, he let go of George's hand. His hand felt limp at his side, but Clay was fiddling and fidgeting, practically buzzing with anxiety. In an instant, all wandering gazes were thrown onto Clay again with incredible, horrible weight.

"Are you serious?" Clay says, his voice surprisingly level but quiet, almost inaudible. "Are you- are you asking me if I'm happy that you just *outed* me in front of our party guests?"

Dan's brows raised. "What, so you don't deny it?"

Clay's jaw clicked as he clenched it. "No, I don't deny it, actually. I'm gay."

Dan's mouth nearly fell open with shock, but in an instant, Clay's mother swooped in in a weak attempt to save the conversation. "Why don't we eat?" she says in a voice so strained that George actually cringed. There was something about the fact that she just *breezed* over her son being outed by her boyfriend that really didn't sit right with him. "Let's eat, everybody," she says again, her eyes wide but her smile still on.

"Wait, I'm not done," Dan interrupts. "I want to settle this once and for all." George actually rolled his eyes. "Clay, you- you're *gay*, and you decide to get a boyfriend and bring him here in secret?"

"Yeah," Clay drones on, now-empty wine glass cradled in his hand, "I decided to just *get* a boyfriend, y'know, pick it up from the store on my way here."

Something about it was so underwhelming. The guests stared from Clay to Dan, and Clay's mother looked as if her brain had short-circuited. There was no shouting, no hugging, no words of discouragement or acceptance. There was absolute silence and tension hanging heavy in the air, so heavy it weighed everyone down.

"You know what, Dan?" Anna starts up, taking Tori's drink from beside her, gulping it all down in one go, and pointing an accusatory finger at her future step-dad, "fuck you. Fuck you! You think you can just- out my brother at a fucking *Christmas party* and have everyone be okay with it?" She turns to her mother, "you dated a dipshit, Mom. This is fucked. Now give me some more wine."

"I don't know why Dan would tell such a lie at the dinner table," Clay's mom says with a very, very strained laugh. Her tone was so flimsy that if someone flicked it, it would shatter. "Right, Clay?"

Clay sighed. "No, not a lie, remember? I just said it. I'm *gay*. I like guys. And probably girls, but who cares?"

In an instant, Clay's mother's predatory eyes went from fixating on her son to locking on George. George gulps. "Oh, so it's *you* who did this? You're his boyfriend?"

"Yeah," George says weakly. Her can see her fists clench.

"How- how *dare* you do this to my son and come to a household where you *clearly* don't belong--"

"No," Clay interrupts, and for the first time in this interaction, Clay didn't sound blank. He sounded *angry*. "Look, Mom, you can disregard my sexuality all you like, but you're not going to

turn this on George. You just aren't. Because you know what? I love him, and yeah, we're dating. We have been for two years, and it's been fucking *awesome*." George felt all of the attention previously on Clay slowly shift to him. He gulps under the burning gazes, yet tries his best to stand strong.

"Clay," his mother starts, her brows drawn together and her hand reaching across the table, for him. "Sweetheart, let's sort this out later. For now, why can't we just eat?" Why was she trying to save this conversation? It was eons past long gone. George's eyes flickered to the side to notice that one parent was already picking up her purse and her husband seemed quite ready to abandon ship. George felt similarly; he was ready to leave this place with Clay beside him.

George half expected Clay to give in and sit at the table and eat dinner as if nothing had happened, but to his pleasant surprise, this wasn't the outcome.

"I think Dan was right," Clay counters, "we need to sort this out now."

Clay's mother, absolutely exasperated, motions dramatically to the guests left and right. "This is no way to treat guests, Clay!"

"It doesn't fucking *matter*, Mom," Clay hisses back, "because your *boyfriend* already made this party into a shit show, so why not finish strong? Lay it on me, Mom. Tell me how you feel about my sexuality. Tell me *everything* just so we can get it over with and move on."

"Well," she starts, voice timid. "Clay, I can't even recognize you right now... I think you've had too much to drink, and I think George is confusing you a little-"

"Oh, so first I'm drunk, now I'm confused?" Clay actually *laughs*. "Yeah. Sure. What else do you have to say?" It was as if Clay was on the edge of his seat to hear every insult his mother could gather and hurl at him, and George watched.

Helpless.

"There isn't anything else to say, Clay," she retaliates. "You- you're really scaring me."

Clay's momentary sarcasm evaporated once she played that card. The *worried parent* card.

It seemed as if his mind couldn't handle comprehending this at the moment, so instead, George watched as Clay turned to the other end of the table, where his father stood. "Dad?" Clay asked, his voice quiet and just above a whisper. Clay's father gave him a strained, yet genuine smile.

"I'm sorry, Clay, I'm just trying to process and understand what's going on here..."

"What's going on is that your son is a fag," Dan spits.

The word was like a shot fired.

An explosion that left George's ears ringing.

George looked to Clay in fear to realize that he was completely stunned. Clay's eyes were wide pools of fear with nothing left to give and no ability to absorb anything else; he had been wounded so many times that he couldn't feel the incoming bullets, and it was such an awful sight that even George, powerless George knew he had to do something.

So, he took Clay's hand in his once again, cleared his throat, and very clearly said, "you know what? Clay and I are just gonna go away for a bit. I don't have anything to say to you Dan because,

frankly, I'm disgusted."

George ignored the shocked expressions of Clay's parents and Dan, with his black eyes and angled brows. He didn't care, because they owed them nothing. Instead, he turned to Clay and gave his hand a gentle tug.

"Hey," he murmurs, "c'mon, let's go out for a little bit, yeah?"

Clay nods mutely, but that was enough for George as he made his way out of that dining room and its toxic atmosphere and the toxic people within it. George's only goal was to get the hell out of there.

Once the distant murmurings faded into nothing but white noise, George made his way up the stairs to where he knew Clay's bedroom was. He never let go of Clay's hand, but he did check behind him a few times to make sure he was still okay. Clay just looked blank as he was clearly still processing what had happened.

But as soon as George shut the bedroom door behind them, something in Clay just broke.

He stood there, hands flying up to cover his face as he just sobbed. His shoulders jumped and his hands muffled the sad sounds and hiccups as he cried, and George thought he died a little at the sight of the love of his life completely beaten down by life like this.

"Clay," George starts, "come here, it's... it'll be okay..."

George simply opens his arms, and Clay runs into them in an instant. They hadn't even had time to turn a light on, but there was something more peaceful about standing in the darkness of Clay's bedroom, holding on to each other, the only sound being Clay's muffled sobs and sniffing, and George's whisperings and attempts to soothe him.

"I'm sorry," Clay hiccuped from where his face was buried in George's neck, "I- I said such mean things to you earlier, I didn't mean it, I'm sorry-"

"Clay," George murmurs, "it's okay. I know you didn't mean it, and I didn't mean what I said either. It's okay." He takes a deep breath as he traces a hand through Clay's hair to try to calm him more, but the tears seemed never-ending.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Clay whispered, "I was- I was supposed to have everyone gathered, and, and, maybe they wouldn't- be *happy* about it but- but at least-" He sobs particularly hard, "at least it would be mine. My moment. My decision." He sniffles sadly, enough so that George felt his heart crack a little more. "B-but he *took* that from me."

"I know, I know," George whispers back, hugging Clay tighter to try and cease his shuddering and trembling, "but remember what you said to me last night?" He lets go of him cautiously, and in an instant, Clay floundered, already panicking at the loss of security. But George replaced his hands to rest on Clay's face dimly lit by the starlight outside. His eyes were puffy around the edges and his cheeks were wet, but that didn't matter. George cupped his cheeks and brushed his thumb under his eye to catch a tear. "I love you, and you love me," he recites, "and that's all that matters."

Clay sniffles again, and his eyes slip closed as he leans into George's hand. "And that's all that matters," he echoes in a shaky, sobbing whisper, but that was enough. George smiles at him, and even if Clay couldn't reciprocate it, he knew he understood.

"That's right," George confirms, and he lets go of Clay's face to hug him, and rock with him gently, pulling Clay's face to bury in his shoulder again. He wasn't always the best with emotions

and comforting people, but with Clay, it came easier. He just loved him so much and knew him so well that comforting him came as second nature, and it felt like a necessity.

They stood like that for a long, long time, rocking back and forth, Clay crying for a good portion of it until he couldn't cry anymore but he still was hiccuping and sobbing, just without any tears, and he clung onto George tightly. At some point, they ended up sitting on the edge of the bed because Clay fell asleep with his head in George's lap.

George didn't disturb him for a good while as it was relieving to look downward and see his boyfriend sleeping, expression peaceful but puffy, pink-rimmed eyes telling a different story.

George didn't so much as twitch in movement before Alex knocked on the door with the news that there was an extra bedroom in his house he would gladly let them stay in. It was eerie to see Alex, who was usually squawking and cracking jokes, being deadly serious in this moment. George couldn't recall a moment when Alex had been like this.

Once George did wake Clay up, it was with a kiss to the forehead, and a soft "let's get out of here" that Clay didn't question.

Even from the backseat of Alex's car and the white noise of the radio, George couldn't tell exactly what Clay was thinking. Despite the well of tears he'd used up, Clay still seemed to be in the processing phase. By some miracle, they managed to get Clay *out* of that house without confrontation of any homophobic assholes that resided there.

George was sure to text Anna and tell her that Clay wasn't okay at the moment, but he would be. Saying that Clay was *fine* would be a lie. He wasn't fine, but that was okay. George would be here for him until he was fine, and he would be here after that, too.

They didn't exchange a single word, even as they silently made their way to Alex's spare bedroom. They contributed their thanks after filing into the room and silently changing into more comfortable clothing before crawling into bed, together. *Together*. Not on separate floors. There's the silver lining.

"We're gonna be okay," George whispered into Clay's hair as they laid tangled together in the bed. Clay leaned his head upward and pressed a brief, soft kiss to George's lips before he finally says,

"We're going to be okay."

Even if they fell asleep in a bed that wasn't theirs, and Clay's world shattered in on him, they were together and inseparable, and that was all that mattered.

Together, they could conquer the world, but for now, they would try to be okay again.

Chapter End Notes

I was half asleep while I wrote this but I was determined to update, so here you go!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

oh my god thank you so much for 5k reads?!? I can't believe it?!

I love each and every one of you SO so much, thank you for your support!!

!!WARNING, MENTIONS OF THE F-SLUR!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay

Clay usually found himself to be in the small percentage of people who couldn't recall their dreams whatsoever.

But tonight was an exception.

On the rare occurrences that he *did* remember his dreams, it was usually only bits and pieces, fragments of words said or distant colors that had painted his vision. This time, he seemed to be stuck inside some rendition of a nightmare he couldn't shake himself from.

He found himself in something of a scene, a dark void with only bright lights around to make it memorable. Clay couldn't tell whether the lights were stars, or just fireflies, but the flickering illumination gave him opportunity to look down at his open hands. A small, silver ring rested there. But he was alone, with no one to give it to.

In an instant, he felt as if the ring was burning his hand until he dropped it entirely, and no matter how quickly he reached to grab it, the ring bounced off itself and into the velvety depths of the darkness. Lost, as if it were nothing but a figment of his imagination.

What's going on is that your son is a fag.

Why don't we just settle this later?

Clay, I can't even recognize you right now.

Clay discovered that cupping his hands over his ears didn't block the noise.

Your son is a fag.

Can't even recognize you.

Settle this later.

Fag.

Recognize you.

Later.

Fag-

When Clay opened his eyes, he realized he was staring into darkness. The stars were gone, no more flickering lights, and there was only the blank void. He couldn't tell if these haunting, screaming voices were part of a nightmare or just a memory.

Clay could practically still feel his mother's sharp, disapproving gaze burning into his skin, and he could still *hear* Dan's sharp tone as he said the fateful, unspeakable word.

It wasn't until he was shaken awake that he realized he'd cupped his hands harshly over his ears with enough force that his muscles trembled, and enough force that he couldn't hear George's voice other than a soft hum.

"Hey," George says, and very cautiously he slips his hands under Clay's to pull them from his own ears. "Were you having a nightmare?"

He sounded so tired, and as Clay's eyes blinked open and adjusted to the darkness, he noticed that he looked tired, too.

"Yeah," Clay says breathlessly, "sorry, did I wake you up?"

George shakes his head. "No... I couldn't sleep."

They're silent for a moment, the only sound being the slip against the sheets as Clay sat up and rested his back against the headboard of the bed. He rubbed the heels of his palms against his closed lids.

He let go of a breath he'd apparently been holding onto as he felt a pair of arms wrap around him from behind, and a cheek rest on his upper back. It all still felt surreal. Clay's memory was cloudy from the moment George's hand gripped his at the dinner table and they went upstairs. His mind went fuzzy from then on. He felt like he was watching life from under water until now, when that nightmarish scene in his head forced him to break through the surface. But George was here to ground him, as always, by hugging him and just *being* here, even if that was all he could do.

"How did he know?" Clay suddenly whispers.

"What?" George says back. His voice vibrated against his neck.

"Dan," Clay starts. "How did he... know that I'm- that I'm gay?"

There was no response for a while. Probably because George didn't know, either.

"I don't know," George admits, "but... let's not think about it, okay? Just for now, let's not think about it." He yawned, and all of a sudden, Clay felt a wave of guilt. He wondered how George was doing as this must've brought back some horrid memories, especially as he had to be there to watch.

When Clay looked at the window and took George's advice; for now, he didn't have to think about *it*, the elephant in the room. Those thoughts could be stored away for later because the situation certainly wouldn't vanish or improve overnight. He could sit in this room, Alex's parent's room, and bask in the feeling of procrastinating his own worry. But sometimes, letting go was the only answer.

However, as he looked out the window, he realized that all he wanted was to see snow pooling around the sill and watch the little white flakes flutter down in contrast against the dark sky as backdrop. He realized he wished he was in New York, in their shoebox apartment with Patches always trying to wiggle between him and George to be included. He wished he could wake up to the feeling of cold feet because the heater broke again, but use this as the excuse to hold George against him, closer and tighter. He didn't want to wake up in his friend's spare bedroom just to stay away from his parents because just because they were his blood-relations, doesn't mean he *owes* them endless gratitude when they had done him, and his boyfriend, wrong.

"George, I wanna go home," Clay says suddenly as he realizes that there was no snow falling outside, no broken heater and no suffocating cuddles to make up for it. There was silence, and dread.

George hums, "me too," he admits, "but home isn't going anywhere. Let's go to sleep."

Home isn't going anywhere.

After a few, short, drowsy moments of reflection, Clay decided that George was right.

He laid down, turned over to hold George close to him, and fell asleep.

It felt cruel of the world to allow Christmas morning to come.

He didn't wake to the sound of people laughing downstairs, or his mother knocking on his door, or his dad shouting at him from afar to hurry up and open his presents already.

He woke to silence.

Well, *almost*.

His phone was buzzing with incoming text notifications that at first he reached out blindly to silence, yet when another vibration sounded, he gave in and checked it. Though, he discovered, as he opened his eyes, that George was clinging onto him still, dead asleep aside from the mild, almost inaudible grumblings of protest as Clay moved to check his phone. Despite the mess he was on the inside, he smiled down at the sight. Some things never got old.

His one hand settling in George's hair to run through the strands and his other hand holding his phone, Clay squinted to look at the screen.

There were multiple texts from multiple people.

SapNap:

Hey, man, how are you doing?

(He knew shit was real when Nick *texted* him, as opposed to a discord message.)

Anna:

Call me when you get the chance, okay?

(He immediately replied to that with an "I will, but don't worry, I'm okay.")

Sofia:

I just wanted to say that I'm sorry about
what happened to you last night at dinner,
and I wanted to check up on you!

(That was nice of her to do, especially because he wasn't quite sure how things were with her since he came out to her. But, apparently, Sofia wasn't as homophobic and shitty as his own parents. He responded with something of a standard message, saying that he appreciated her reaching out, but insisted he was doing alright and currently was in Alex's parent's house and away from his parents. Sofia replied almost immediately after and insisted that he (and George) could stay at her house if they needed to.)

And finally, was the most interesting message.

Tori:

I'm sorry, Clay

(He couldn't find it in himself to respond, but the mere sight of the message brought some sort of peace to his troubled mind. Tori was far from perfect, but so was he. He couldn't forgive her just yet, but he was on the way there.)

Once he successfully sifted through his text messages, Clay decided he needed to call Anna given she must be incredibly stressed from not hearing from him for hours. However, there was one small problem.

"No," George mutters against Clay's shirt as he still clung onto him stubbornly as he tried to get up from the bed. Clay laughs.

"George, c'mon, I have to call Anna," he mutters back in a slightly crackly morning voice. "You have to let go."

"No, I don't," George argues, though he hadn't even opened his eyes yet. "Just... call her from here."

Clay, as always, gave in, but not without a teasing eye roll. "You're such a dork." But he was sitting back down anyways, trying not to smile stupidly at how George settled right back in, even as Clay called his sister.

"Clay? Oh my God, I was so worried about you."

He cringes a little. "Sorry, I was sleeping for a long time." He turns his head to check the clock on the bedside table to see that it was already one pm. At first, he felt bad for being invited into someones house only to sleep in so late. Then he remembered the circumstances, and knew they would understand. It was also bizarre to be able to sleep in so late without a certain mother bustling in and bothering him. "How are things at home?"

"Uh... do you want the honest answer, or the brief answer?"

Clay sighs, "the honest one."

Anna sighs back. *"Pretty shitty, then. Mom had a... something of a meltdown and Dan, well, I think I punched him but I can't remember. I was pretty drunk, dude."* Clay can't help but laugh at the visual of his little sister punching their mom's boyfriend. *"Then we woke up and opened*

presents. We had this- hey, Mom, no, I'm on the phone with, uh- no, give that back-!"

Clay's heart stuttered as he listened to the clear noise of a phone being taken from a hand and muffled bickering through the phone receiver enough to realize what was happening. His mother must've walked in on Anna on the phone, known who she was talking to, and took the phone from her to talk to Clay instead. But, there was one, teeny-tiny detail:

He had absolutely *nothing* to say to his mother.

"Clay?"

Clay froze. He felt like he was suffocating all over again, and in an instant, the memories hit him like a wall.

The way his nails dug into the skin of his palms and the feeling of sweat slipping down the side of his neck as he stared at his future with his family crumble before his eyes. He remembered gripping his wine glass so hard it almost broke, he remembered his throat feeling dry and the words he wanted to say feeling caught within it. He remembered how the dim lights and candles flickered ominously upon Dan's face in a way that belonged to a storybook villain, and the way his mother's face was bathed entirely in shadows.

Clay realized now that he couldn't say anything, so there was no point in trying. So he took the phone from his ear, and even though he could tell there was still sound coming from the speaker, he hit the fateful red button to terminate the call. He set his phone back on the bedside table, and sank into the blankets.

"You okay?" George asks groggily, head lifting a little to try and meet Clay's eyes. Clay meets them, and loosely, he tucks his arm around George.

"I will be," he answers with confidence.

They ended up returning to the house.

They had to. Not because they were morally obliged to, but because their unpacked suitcases awaited them.

They ended up having a nice lunch with Alex's parents, a lunch filled with gratitude and laughter despite the state of Clay's world at the moment. It was nice to pretend like everything was normal as Alex's mother told Clay and George all about her favorite Christmas from when she was younger. Alex's father recounted his favorite cookie recipe, which after talking it up enough, they decided to make themselves. He ended up being right as the cookies were great.

But, all good things must end, eventually, which is how they ended up piled into Alex's compact car and driving back to the prison-like "home" Clay needed to conquer. He didn't want to call it *home*, because his home was sitting right beside him.

Home isn't going anywhere, came George's sleepy voice in Clay's mind as he looked at the tall, brick house that belonged to his mother. He stared at it from the backseat of Alex's car, staring into the dark windows and tall walls with what he attempted to be confidence. But, what he *did* do confidently was walk up to the front door with George's hand tangled in his. He didn't let go because he realized there was no reason to. There was nothing to hide anymore.

He noticed how his hands were trembling at his sides and within George's hand, even when he

tried to will himself to stop shaking, he didn't. He tried to raise his hand to knock on the door, but it was useless as his fingers seemed to be protesting.

"Are you ready?" George asks patiently. Clay wanted to say no, but he knew better than that. He nods slowly, so George raises his own fist and knocks.

Clay gulps as he feels the nausea consume him whole. It started with his stomach, making the pit in it feel heavier than ever. Then he felt his palms get clammy, and the familiar sweat form on the back of his neck. His mouth felt to dry for words to form, and his throat felt too tight to breathe. But he felt George give his hand a squeeze as the footsteps on the other side of the door grew closer and closer.

Of course it was Dan who answered the door.

Clay felt like his limbs froze again, like he was a big, useless, motionless being as he looked into the shark-like eyes and beefy build of Dan, who, despite being an inch or two shorter than him, still found a way to look down on him.

"Hi," Dan says, and Clay feels his hands tremble again.

"Hello," George answers for him. "We just wanted to get our suitcases."

"Suitcases?" Dan repeats. His eyes never left Clay's face. "Are you leaving?"

George quiets for a second. "Yes," he answers shortly.

"Is that so, Clay?" Dan says. His eyes looked vicious.

"I already answered your question," George says, "now, I'd appreciate it if you'd let us get our things and be on our way."

Clay felt his heart swell a little as he knew he was lucky to have George at his side, and despite the sweet rush of euphoria, he couldn't quite displace the resentment that resided inside of himself.

Dan's lips flatten in a thin line. "Fine," he says, as if he were the one in control here, "just... say goodbye to your mother, would you?"

"Yeah," Clay whispers, and his voice wavered. But Dan stepped aside, and they made their way in. For a second, he feared that George would let go of his hand and they would get their things separately, but as always, George seemed to read his mind as they made their way to the basement together. It only took a second for George to gather his clothes and stuff them back into his suitcase.

It was going upstairs that was more treacherous.

Despite trying to be as quiet and unnoticeable as possible, Clay suspected that Dan went and told his mom that they were home, because she was waiting there in his room.

Clay felt like the wind was knocked out of him.

"Clay, please," she starts, "you can't just- leave like this." Her tone was pleading, begging. Clay felt his heart sink.

As much as he hated it, he felt *guilty*. Because she was trying to be nice to him, trying to have a conversation with her but all he was doing was shutting her out. Clay forced himself to remember

how she refused to even *think* about Clay's sexuality as well as how she pawned it off on confusion and George. He made himself remember the times, even as a child, where he felt the crushing pressure of success, and the expectations set upon him that were like death sentences.

He had to remember this as he looked to his mother. He had to remember what she was capable of, because every single time, she put on this sad act of *wait, don't go* and every damn time it fooled him.

"You can't just leave," she whispers in desperation.

"I can, actually," Clay says. "And I will." He doesn't look up as he gathers his own clothing and packs it up, a symbol of escape he needed so desperately.

His mother trailed after them, even after they were back downstairs, and her constant whining and begging didn't cease. "Just stay one more night," she begs. "Or come back, at least. Will you come back?"

Clay whirls on her. "No," he says. "I *won't* come back, not for a long time. At least, not until it feels right." Even though it physically hurt to see the person his mother has become, how she has spiraled into someone she wasn't supposed to be all because of one, toxic, wealthy man at the name of Dan. But honestly, Clay couldn't hold himself accountable for everyone's mistakes; that was for his mother to sort out, and if she asked for help, he would. But for now, Clay had his own set of problems to attend to.

It took a long time to reach the front door as many goodbyes needed to be said. For instance, as he passed the kitchen, he saw Anna there, who ran to him and hugged him tight, and gave George the same.

"I'll miss you guys," she says into Clay's shoulder, and then into George's.

"You can visit us any time," Clay insists. "Seriously. Our apartment might be a piece of shit, but we can always make room for you."

"Or we can pawn you off on SapNap," George says. They all chuckle, but eventually, they look at each other with a sad look.

"Take care, you guys," Anna says, "please. When you go home, take some time to relax. George, make sure Clay relaxes, okay?"

George nods knowingly. "Yeah, I've gotten pretty good at getting Clay to take care of himself," George says nonchalantly, and Anna laughs, but Clay can see the glistening tears gathering in her eyes.

"You take care, too," Clay says. "Go and stay with Alex if you need to."

"Yeah," she whispers, "I will."

It was hard to leave her behind, even after a few more hugs and a steady walk to the front door, but again, he was stopped in his path by a few people this time. His father, Carol, and Tori. Tori's husband was nowhere to be found, as usual, but Cecilia and Joseph stood and stared at them in wonder.

"Clay," his dad says "I know I didn't have the best reaction last night, but I was just shocked." Clay looks up into his eyes, and though he braced himself as he was ready to look into eyes of doubt and deceit, he only saw good intention and depths of kindness.

“We all were,” Carol pipes in.

“But son, I want you to know...” hesitantly, his father puts a hand on his arm, a small show of affection that was brilliantly affective. “I love you. And... this doesn’t change anything. I’m just happy you’re happy, kid.”

His dad’s eyes flickered over to George, “and... good choice.”

“You know you can always visit us in Albany,” Carol adds, and her smile was wide and bright and genuine, and all of a sudden, Clay wished he spent more time getting to know her better.

“Thanks, Dad,” Clay says weakly, because he really didn’t know what else to say. But he figured the gathering tears in his eyes as he met his dad’s eyes once more spoke for themselves. “And thank you, Carol. I’m sorry it all went down like this but... it was so good to see you guys again.”

Before he could prepare himself for it, a pair of arms wrapped tight around him, and it took him a moment to realize that these arms were his father’s. But Clay hugged him back, arms wound tight around his dad. It was funny as he never quite realized how much he missed someone until he went into moments like this.

Then, Clay’s eyes rested on the last person. Tori.

Tori gave him a watery, weak, partially-forced smile. “I... know it was rough,” Tori said, “and I don’t really have any ‘but’ for that. I just... I hope we can work past it.”

Clay didn’t feel angry at the abruptness of Tori’s statement. In fact, he was relieved at the honesty as for once, Tori didn’t deceive him or sugar-coat her words.

“Yeah, I think we will,” Clay says.

“I love you,” Tori blurts, “and- I know I was... well, you know. But.” She looks to George and at first, Clay cringed out of instinct. “George?”

George tenses a little as he answers “yeah?”

“I never apologized to you,” she states factually, “and... I really, really need to. I’m *so* sorry, truly. I know I put you both through a lot of pain.”

“You did,” George says truthfully, “but I forgive you.”

“You do?” Clay and Tori both say in unison with equivalent shock.

“Yeah,” George says with a small, nervous, *adorable* laugh. (Clay likes it when he does that.) “Of course. Everything turned out okay, didn’t it? You didn’t out Clay, Clay and I are still together...”

“I guess I never... thought about it like that,” Tori says with a thoughtful frown. “But... take care of my brother, will you?”

“I will,” George responds with such grace and confidence that it made Clay’s heart flutter.

Clay looked to George with a smile and George reciprocated it, and he squeezed his hand in a little way he knew meant *let’s get out of here*, just like George had whispered to him last night.

“George!” came a sudden, shrill, small voice as the two were halfway down the gravel driveway to Alex’s awaiting car.

Surely enough, there was Cecilia, racing across the driveway, tiny Mary Jane shoes hitting the gravel hard as she desperately cried for them to stop.

“What is it?” George responds as he looks down at the girl, who only looked up at him with her lip caught between her teeth. George squats down to somewhat match her height.

“I- wanted to give you this!” she blurts out as in an instant she pulled out a familiar toy bear from behind her back. And, judging the way George’s brows raised and his lips curled a little, Clay figured it was the very bear that got him in trouble for shop lifting all those days ago. “As... an apology.”

“Oh,” George says, a laugh tumbling from his lips. “You don’t have to, it’s alright-”

“No!” Cecilia interrupts stubbornly. She practically pushes the bear into George’s hands. “I want *you* to have it.”

“Alright,” he says uncertainly, but he takes the bear, returns to his natural height, and tucks it under his arm. “Thank you, though. I appreciate it.”

“Wait!” Cecilia cries, and she throws her arms around George’s legs in what must be a hug as she tilted her head up to look at him with big, puppy eyes. “Let’s see each other soon,” she says. “And Clay, too! And everyone else!”

George and Clay exchanged a look, and they laughed a little before George looked back down at Cecilia. There was something terribly endearing about how good George was with little kids.

“Alright,” George concludes. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“See you soon!” Cecilia echoes.

Clay didn’t know about *soon* as he got into the back seat with George once again, immediately melting into his arms and letting out a slow, heavy exhale of absolute relief.

He watched as the house and the long gravel driveway turned into nothing but a distant recollection as they turned off the street and eventually into the airport.

He didn’t now about *soon*.

But he knew there would be an *again*.

Chapter End Notes

this story still has a good few chapters left, but I plan on publishing a new fic immediately after, so stay tuned for that!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George

Saying that the past few days had been a rollercoaster would be a gigantic understatement.

Towards the end, George had even feared that he was going to *lose* Clay entirely.

But, what made it all worth it was seeing the subtle smile on his face as the car drove away because, despite the awful circumstances, he was finally out to his family. In some twisted way, Dan did him a favor.

Even if they never discovered how Dan found out about Clay's sexuality, it didn't real matter, because what was done was done. Clay was out, and while where his mother stood on that was unclear, Clay's father and Carol had been incredibly supportive. So supportive that George felt like he could tear up watching from the sidelines.

Buried within the bad memories were good ones, too. Slow dancing outside the ballroom where no one could see them with a clear sky of stars above their heads. Kissing in the freezing ocean water with the moonlight flickering in the rippling waves around them. Hiding in that closet in the antique store only to be interrupted by Alex. Or that wonderful night when Clay took him to see the fireflies. Within the pain, there was also beauty.

"Home sweet home!" Clay exclaims as he nudges open their apartment door with his knee. They were met with the sight of their cramped kitchen and living room, and the ajar door to their bedroom. George actually felt his body sink with relief as Clay's mom's house had had so much empty space that it felt lonely everywhere he went. But in here, as chaotic and messy as it was, he felt comfortable and safe.

Immediately, there was a small *meow* from around the corner as out came Patches, scampering across the apartment and looking up at Clay, and eventually padding over to George where she rubbed against his legs and purred happily in a way they both knew meant *welcome home*.

"I never thought I'd miss such a shithole so much," Clay says with a content sigh as he drops his bags beside the door. George shuts the door with his foot and does the same.

"Hey now," George starts, elbowing Clay playfully, "don't be so rude to the apartment."

"Fine, fine. It's a glorified shithole."

"...I really can't correct you on that one."

For a few moments, they busied themselves with unpacking their suitcases and eating some food (with an alarming lack of nutrition) before they found themselves curled up on the couch together, wrapped up in each other and a fair amount of blankets as Star Wars played on their TV. They had subjected themselves to a Star Wars binge and, by now, were on episode four.

There was something about being pried apart for over a week that made the two of them even clingier than usual (if possible). Nick seemed aware of this as, when George invited him over, Nick just responded with *I appreciate the gesture, but I'm gonna let you guys get all of the gayness out*

of your system before I come over tomorrow.

Valid, George had texted back, because the ironic part was he was currently using Clay's stomach as a pillow. Nick didn't need to know that he was right, though.

"Hey," Clay says, and George can feel a hand in his hair. It was peaceful like this, on the couch, Han Solo's voice distant as his head rose and fall with Clay's slow breaths. He almost forgot how wonderful life was in this apartment, even in simple moments like this when they weren't necessarily interacting, but just coexisting. "George," Clay prods, both hands messing with George's hair, enough so that George tilts his head upward to meet his eyes.

"What?" he yawns.

"Aw, don't tell me that you're getting sleepy," Clay says in a highly irritating baby voice complete with a jutted lip. George's playful punch to his arm was enough to silence that joke.

"What do you want?" George asks, trying to sound annoyed, but his hand was raising up and messing up Clay's hair to get back at him.

"Wanna kiss?" Clay wiggles his eyebrows at him in the most *ridiculous* way that made George want to smack him and question the two years he's spent in this relationship.

"I literally can't stand you," George responds, but his tilted-up lips were saying otherwise. He could feel Clay leaning closer to him, and he made no move to stop him.

"*I lih-trally cahnt staaaaahnd you,*" Clay mimics. George gives him a sour look. But, again, he didn't back away.

"Shut up and kiss me," he says famously, and who would Clay be to do otherwise?

Clay leaned forward until their lips met, and they kissed, even though Clay had to crane his neck and George was tugging him closer and closer. They clambered around until they were comfortable yet couldn't find it in themselves to break apart. Occasionally, they'd wander away from each other's lips, and Clay would kiss down his neck to that one spot where George would laugh until he snorted because it tickled and even as he would say *stop it, Clay, you big idiot* within his undying laughter, he'd feel Clay smiling against his neck and say *you're so adorable* in a way that he refused to admit still made his face heat up. But of course, he'd get back at Clay by tickling his sides and making the other writhe with laughter.

They somehow got around to kissing properly again, even after all the tickling and laughing. The only rising problem was that it was two in the morning, or something like that, they didn't know, and they didn't bother to check. But, episode four and already rolled onto episode five, but neither were even close to paying attention.

Even as they were both practically falling asleep and George was lazily toying with the long strands of Clay's blonde hair, they still kissed, until Clay broke apart to yawn against George's shoulder.

"Bed?" George asks as he runs a thumb over the freckles on Clay's cheeks.

"Oho, George," Clay answers stupidly. Stupidly enough to earn a smack over the head, but also a gentle laugh that he just couldn't fight back.

"But seriously, I'm so tired," he continues, and for once there wasn't any *noooo George, let's stay awake, let's play Minecraft, pay attention to me pleeeeeeeeease* and all Clay did was nod mutely.

“Want me to carry you?” Clay asks.

“No,” George answers immediately, but he was smiling still because they both knew he was lying.

“Alright,” Clay responds, standing up and literally scooping up George with him, despite his false protests and distant whines. “Shut up, you big baby. I know you love it when I do this.”

“You have no proof,” George counters, but the very fact that he was hugging Clay’s shoulders and burying his face in his neck served as plenty of proof.

“Sure I don’t,” Clay answers with much sarcasm, but he was too tired to correct him.

It was nice to be in their own room again, even if they had to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the bathroom to brush their teeth. There was nothing quite as wonderful as sitting in a vacant bed with the knowledge that within moments, Clay would emerge from the bathroom to lay beside him.

And there was nothing quite like getting to kiss Clay’s closed lids and whisper *good night*, knowing that he probably received one back, but he’d already fallen asleep.

The mornings were the best when there was no work to get up for, and Clay was still in bed.

George’s eyes drifted open to find Clay still asleep, and though they ended up breaking apart from their cuddles somewhere within their sleep, they couldn’t feel closer. George scooted over a little to be closer, and also because he was going to utilize Clay’s warmth as he slipped his freezing hands under his shirt and on his back.

“George!” Clay shouts, absolutely scandalized as he rolls over and looks at his devious boyfriend with wide, sleepy eyes. God, he was so fucking *pretty* when the sunlight rolled on his face like that, skin like honey and freckles like stars trapped within it.

“What?” George asks innocently, as if he wasn’t trying to kill Clay with his ice cube hands.

“Unbelievable,” Clay mutters as he wraps his arms around George and tugs him down to lay on him, and George very willingly gives into the action as he settled into the warmth.

At first, he was ready to close his eyes and slip into the depths of slumber once more, but he could feel a pair of suspicious hands crawl up to his sides. “Don’t,” he starts, but Clay was already tickling him in a way that George couldn’t really fight because this was karma, after all.

“Clay!” George explains, but he was laughing so hard he couldn’t breathe, and Clay was doing that cute wheezing thing and George thought he was going to *die* because even when Clay wasn’t torturing him with tickles anymore, he still was laughing endlessly.

“It’s snowing,” George says suddenly as he looks out the window and the sliver of outside visible through the crack between the curtains. Fresh snow fell in the morning light, pooling around their window sill and falling onto the ground far below. Onto the honking taxis and passing citizens of New York.

“Wanna go outside?” George asks, as he looks down at Clay, who had cracked open his eyes to look at the snow, but now had closed them again.

“Let’s stay for a bit longer,” Clay murmurs. He scoots yet closer, and George can’t argue as he feels Clay’s warm hands cup either side of his face and tug his face down for a kiss.

Life was so perfect, George decided. Even though it was freezing cold outside with the beautiful, fresh snow, it was warm and safe right here in Clay's arms.

He loved Clay and Clay loved him. And that was all that mattered.

Even as the following months flew by, it felt as if nothing changed. The winter melted into spring within a heart beat. The New Year came and left, but once again the street vendors were selling fresh flowers and the night didn't fall as quickly. As much as George missed the snow, he liked that his and Clay's walks in the park now included looking at actual grass and flowers as opposed to the dead, snow-covered plants they had seen for the past few months.

Life still felt perfect. They had returned to their usual balance of life with lots of video games and very little sleep. Just the usual.

They ended up visiting Clay's dad in Albany for a weekend about a month ago, and it was a wonderful stay. They showed the two around where they lived and around town. Saying they would visit soon wasn't even close to a lie. George felt light whenever he would look over at Clay and see a happy glint in his eyes each time he interacted with his dad. Even if George couldn't have this for himself, it didn't bother him much because Clay could have it. That was more than enough for him.

But, one night, Clay was acting *weird*.

Not as in the weird Clay got when he hadn't slept for too long and he got easily irritable and somehow even more clingy, but a kind of weird that George couldn't place. Where he was unusually jumpy and quick to answer questions before scampering off to make hushed phone calls in a separate room.

"Is something wrong?" George eventually asked as he caved to his own curiosity. They ended up getting pizza and watching the sunset from their open window. Even if it wasn't quite as beautiful as the sunrise from the beaches of Florida all those months ago, the sky still turned beautiful colors and faded into darkness. It was still an ethereal sight.

"No," Clay answers through a mouthful of pizza.

He had always been quite the awful liar.

George just laughed at him, and Clay responded with a bewildered look. "Clay, it's kind of cute how bad you are at lying."

Clay gives him a frustrated look that was extremely hard to take seriously when he had pizza sauce on his face. "Did you just call me cute?"

"I did," George answers nonchalantly.

"Simp."

"What the *fuck*-"

They ended up finishing the rest of the pizza without anymore questions asked, even if George was seriously dying to know what the *hell* was going through Clay's mind.

"Let's go for a drive," Clay stated, instead of answering any of George's questions.

George only obliged without any prodding because Clay let him borrow his sweatshirt.

It wasn't entirely out of character for them to go for a spontaneous night drive as sometimes, they wanted to get out of the city. A lot of the times, Clay wanted to get away from the bustling city noise to go somewhere more quiet. In the city, there was *always* noise, even if it went unnoticed sometimes; distant sounds of construction, people's voices from different apartments or down the street, the sounds of taxi drivers honking at innocent pedestrians.

Their night drives usually went either one of two ways: they talked the whole time, or they blasted music. This night was a music night, apparently, as Clay's playlist was reverberating off the car speakers as they both sat in a wonderful silence and stared out their respective windows.

"Where did you want to go?" George asks over the music.

"I was thinking we could go to the bench," Clay answers.

"Sounds good."

The bench was, well, not actually a bench. There *used* to be a bench when they first started going there. There was a wooden canopy overridden with flowers and ivy and a nearly broken-down wooden bench beneath it that eventually *did* break down, hence, the lack of bench. But they liked to go there often and get a blanket out of Clay's car to lay under the wooden canopy and look at the stars with the lack of city pollution.

George ended up resting his hand on Clay's knee from over the center console. He smiled as he felt the familiar warmth of Clay's hand on his, and once again, he looked out the window.

"Why are you making me close my eyes?"

"Just do it, idiot."

"Is this what you've been all weird about?"

"Come *on*, George- oh, careful, don't step that way, you'll fall off a cliff."

"Not funny."

George, at this point, was confused. He had his hands cupped over his eyes and allowed himself to be lead by Clay's hands planted on his shoulders. It was hilarious how he let himself blindly trust this man all the time, the same man who would completely destroy his trust with Minecraft tournaments.

"Alright. Just- stay there and open your eyes when I say so," Clay says, and George feels the warm hands leave his shoulders and hears some shuffling going on in front of him. What was he planning? Was this some kind of joke? Did he have a midnight picnic set up again?

"Okay," Clay whispers. His voice sounded shaky. "You can open."

George did as instructed, and immediately, he gasped.

The wooden canopy had been decked out with small, yellow lights that illuminated the entire miniature forest park with a soft glow. And, all around them, there were little fireflies, buzzing around in the muggy, warm early-summer New York weather. It was just like that night in Florida where the two had sneaked off into the forest to look at the fireflies.

It really was like living inside the night sky, George thought. And as he looked into Clay's eyes, he realized that the brightest star was right in front of him.

"Clay," George whispers, "this is so beautiful... when did you even do this?"

Clay didn't answer. George could see his lip quivering as both of his hands were wrapped up in his. Clay's eyes were lit up with the lights and fireflies. George never knew it was possible to love someone so much.

George opened his mouth to ask Clay about what he did to deserve such an evening, but he felt one of his hands be let go off as slowly, Clay sunk down to rest on one knee. What was he-

And then he saw the velvet box held in his hand.

Oh.

He watched, mesmerized, as Clay flipped the box open with a small *click* that would change his life forever. And there it was, the silver ring that promised everything George had ever wanted.

"George," Clay says, and George could feel his hand shaking from where it gripped his. George's free hand flew up to his mouth. "I- I'm so in love with you, I really am. I know that I'm kind of a huge nerd, and I don't have all the money in the world to offer you, but I've never been happier than I have been in these past two years." He feels Clay squeeze his hand. "A-and..." Aw, he was shaking so much. "I get it if you want to take it slower and want wait, but... George, will you marry me?"

George felt like he was going to *die* at how much his heart burst at the sight. Clay, holding a ring in his hand in proposal with the lights and fireflies flickering behind him. Clay, who had stopped an airplane to tell him he loved him two years ago. Clay, who was here for him when he felt as if he had hit rock bottom. Clay, who he got to wake up next to every morning.

"Yes," George whispers, and Clay's hand stops shaking right then. "Yes, yes, yes, oh my *God*, yes!"

In an instant, Clay was back on his feet again and George was hugging him so tight that they were spinning around. And then George pulled back enough to kiss him breathless with as much love as he could pour into it because holy *shit*, this wasn't his boyfriend, but his fiancé.

After they kissed enough that they both couldn't breathe, Clay sipped the ring onto George's finger in a way that felt like a puzzle piece snapping in place. And all of a sudden, George felt Clay's hand on his face as he admired the ring and how it shimmered in the lights around them.

"Hey, hey, why are you crying?" Clay murmurs with genuine concern. George's brows raise.

"I'm crying?" he questions as his hand rises to his own face. And sure enough, he felt the tears there, dripping down slowly and falling. He'd never cried of happiness before, but now that he was, he just couldn't stop. "Oh, I guess I am-" And they both laughed, but George sniffled in a way that made Clay go *aww*, and George didn't stop him.

"It's beautiful, Clay," George whispers as he holds his hand out again to just admire the ring.

"You like it?" Clay says timidly. George looks up at him and grins.

"I love it," he answers. But as he really looks into his eyes, he can see the sheen of shimmer to them that certainly wasn't typical. "Clay, are *you* crying?"

Clay snuffles, “no.”

A tear drips down his cheek and they both laugh some more before they were kissing, tears streaming down both of their faces, and time and time again Clay ran his thumb along George’s now-ringed ring finger.

The car ride back was full of happy chatter without a care in the world. On the dashboard was a brand new polaroid photo of the two of them, tears in both of their eyes. Clay had taken it selfie-style as George held his ringed finger up to the camera. In the photo, Clay was kissing his cheek and George was smiling bright.

Below the photo, Clay had written *he said yes!* in sharpie.

George looked in his lap to admire the ring for the umpteenth time.

Of course he said yes.

Chapter End Notes

here you go, here's the fluff I promised you in the tags.

there will be one more chapter after this, but fear not! I am currently planning out my next fic!

thank you all SO so much for sticking with me through this fic, I love you all <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Last chapter! :(

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clay

If life had been perfect before, then this was heaven.

Clay felt as if life had lifted him onto a cloud he'd never float down from, even as the days after the night of his proposal dragged into months. Even three, four months after that magical night, he never had broken from his daze of looking at George and realizing that they weren't just two idiots who were boyfriends. They were two idiots who were getting *married*.

Clay would never forget the moment when George was streaming, speed running with Nick, Bad and Clay, and the chat realized that his ring finger was now occupied. At first, they planned on waiting a little longer to tell the fans that they were getting married and had been dating for two years and engaged for nearly five months.

But it was in that moment that George stared at his camera, laughed nervously, and sent a panicked discord pm to Clay saying *what should we do? Should we tell them?*

As a response, George held his hand up to the camera with a ring on his finger, the camera focused on the sterling silver with George's out-of-focus grin as a backdrop. "That's right!" he says with full enthusiasm, "I'm engaged!" He ignored the fact that Nick used this moment of distraction to punt his character into lava, and ignored Bad's squawking laughter to go with it.

And of course, the entire chat was going:

TO DREAM?

DREAM?

OYSUDFIBYDUFBYDUIFB IT BETTER BE DREAM YOU BRITISH MOTHERFUCKER!!

DREAMMMM COME GET YOUR MANNNNN

And, perfectly on cue, the door opened in the background of George's face cam.

His eyes widened slightly and he turned out of frame to look at Clay and whisper *are you okay with this?* to which his fiancé enthusiastically nodded.

George turned back to face his camera to see the chat blowing up, going crazy and insisting that this was where they got to meet George's fiancé. Taking a deep breath, George gave Clay a small nod of approval and Clay stood in frame behind George before squatting down to get his face in focus. "Hey, guys," he says, laughing, "it's me, Dream! And uh, as some of you already suspected,

it's me, I'm George's fiancé."

George rolls his eyes playfully, but his smile was dripping with fondness, "yup. I'm getting married to this idiot."

OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD

STAY FUCKING CALM!!!!

OH MY GOD IT'S HAPPENING, MOM, THE GAYS ARE TOGETHER

IT'S A WIN FOR THE HOMOS!!

HOLY SHIT DREAM IS HOT WTF

"Idiot?" Clay turns away from the camera and pouts at George, "take it back, Georgie. Say you love me."

"In front of Twitch?" George gasps dramatically, "such PDA, Dreamie. You should know better."

SAY YOU LOVE HIM WTF

THAT'S YOUR FIANCE DUMBASS

So, George gave his face cam a devious grin as he leaned closer to Clay and whispered a soft "I love you" into his ear. If the chat was going crazy before, it was bouncing off the walls now.

"He said it!" Clay cries victoriously, "he said he loves me!"

"No one will believe you!" George shouts back, "you have no proof!"

"What, should I say you were talking dirty instead?"

George gapes at him. "Clay!"

OHOHO TALKING DIRTY I SEE

OK BUT THE WAY HE CALLED HIM CLAY INSTEAD OF DREAM JUST

FYDUBFYDUBFYDUFDF THIS IS A PRANK IT HAS TO BE

But Clay was already zipping out of his room, cackling so loudly it could be picked up even from George's mic as he was out of the room. So, George slipped off his headphones and shouted "get back here, you dumbass!" that Clay mimicked back at him.

"Alright, chat," Sapnap's voice came over the stream, "let's see how many times I can kill George with lava while he and Dream do their usual gay shit."

George probably died about ten or fifteen times before he returned to his room.

And as Clay listened to George scolding their friend over call for killing him so many times, he couldn't stop smiling from where he sat in his respective space, trying to focus on gathering wood, because now there was nothing left to hide.

Telling Clay's mother and George's parents wasn't even half as easy as telling their millions of

fans.

Breaking the news to Clay's dad and his now-wife was enjoyable, actually. They FaceTimed them the morning after the proposal and showed George's ring to the screen in a way that made them both shout with excitement. It was adorable.

Telling George's parents was hard to watch as, at first, George considered not telling them at all and only telling his siblings, but Clay talked him out of that and instead got him to call them and at least say it. Clay had been there the whole time, holding his free hand and being the shoulder for George to lean on.

"Clay and I are getting married, Mum," George had said. But his voice was stripped of enthusiasm and plain, as if this was an emotionless fact he was relaying onto a stranger.

His mother had cried, and said, *"I've wasted all of this time trying to tell you who to be and- look what I've missed."*

It was the most mature conversation George and his mother had engaged in. And though George burst into tears the instant the call was finished, whether out of relief or sadness, Clay held him and provided him with the comfort he needed.

Clay's mother, on the other hand. That was a hard call to make.

His hands had been shaking so badly, even when George was there beside him just as Clay had been earlier. When he broke the news to his mother, she was silent for a long time at first. A long, long time, not even a breath of noise to the point where Clay wondered if she had merely hung up on him.

"You love him, don't you?" That had been her immediate response. *"You really love him."*

"Yeah," Clay had responded. No sarcasm, no bitterness. Just truth. *"I do really love him, Mom."*

He could hear her smile on the other end of the phone as she said,

"So when's the wedding?"

The wedding was in December because it seemed that the biggest events of their relationship had always been around Christmas time.

It was a quick turnaround from engagement to marriage, but it was a small, modest wedding, so it wasn't too much of a hassle. They ended up getting married at Central Park with a wooden canopy decorated with blue flowers and and frosty-white roses and little lights strewn all around the canopy and aisles, just like the scene George had been met with when Clay proposed to him. There weren't many people but every chair was filled, and every onlooker had to shed a tear at the beauty of the two men in love.

But Clay would never, *never* forget the magical feeling on that wedding day.

He felt the beginnings of nervousness fill him as he got ready in the back room, letting his father tie his tie for him, the same light blue tie his mother gave him last Christmas when she was trying to get Clay and Sofia together.

"I wore this on my first date with your mother," Clay's father had said as he straightened out the tie

that now belonged to his son, “but it’s yours now.”

“Yeah,” Clay had said breathlessly, and he looked into his father’s kind eyes to find them filling with tears. “Dad, don’t cry!” Clay says with a small laugh, “you’re gonna make *me* cry.”

“I know,” he says, voice thick, “but Clay, I’m just so happy for you, kiddo. You’ve grown up to be a real good guy, you know that?”

As Clay waited at the aisle for his soon-to-be husband to join him, he fiddled with his hands and thought of one of his favorite Christmas memories with George. It was two years ago on Christmas Eve, and George was very, very, *very* drunk. It was hilarious. Clay had teased him for being a lightweight and being a romantic drunk but all George would do was giggle at him and say *dance with me, dance with me*.

They had danced but George kept tripping on Clay’s feet and blaming it on him and eventually saying “*let’s go to bed*,” but looking up at Clay with a furrowed expression, pouting as he said, “*but not like that, you perv*.”

Clay was probably extremely drunk as well, but he remembered everything as clear as day. They laid in bed together, staring at the ceiling, curled together for heat purposes (it was cold outside, okay) and silent aside from the distant sounds of their friends playing Minecraft in the living room. The door was open a crack, but both were too warm and comfortable to get up and shut it.

“*Why don’t we have mistletoe?*” George had asked. He’d tilted his head up to stare at Clay in the dim lighting, pupils dilated and cheeks flushed from the alcohol. “*Why don’t we have more mistletoe?*”

“*We don’t need mistletoe*,” Clay had replied, pinching George’s cheek, “*you can kiss me whenever you want. You don’t need a plant as an excuse*.”

But George didn’t seem convinced. “*No, no*,” he slurs, “*I want mistletoe, Clay. Lots of mistletoe. Lots of kissing. Because. We deserve all the mistletoe, you know?*”

“*Yeah*,” Clay had laughed, because he didn’t know. George wasn’t making any sense, but the way he was furrowing his brows and looking so determined was just too damn cute to disagree with.

“*There’s no mistletoe above our heads*,” George had said eventually, head laying on Clay’s chest, “*but I’ll kiss you anyway*.”

For some reason, Clay found that that short, drunk monologue was symbolic.

The world wouldn’t provide them with mistletoe because the world didn’t want them to be together. Sometimes, it wouldn’t be easy. There wouldn’t be a chat filled with supporters, and there would be a mean audience cheering for their failure.

There wouldn’t always be snow outside, there wouldn’t always be twinkle lights and white roses and blue flowers. There wouldn’t always be supportive fathers and sweet siblings. There wouldn’t always be sweet kisses under the moon and easy, lazy days.

But in that moment, as he watched George walk down the aisle in a black suit and a teary smile, Clay knew.

Nothing was going to break them apart.

“Hi,” George says as he takes both of Clay’s hands and steps up with him to stand on the platform.

He listened to the sounds of their audience sitting down in their folding chairs, and the soft *aww* that followed as they looked into each other's eyes.

"Hey, gorgeous," Clay responds, but it wasn't as flirtatious and playful as he anticipated, the kind of teasing tone that would always get George to scrunch his face at him and smack him but laugh anyways. Instead, his voice was soft and genuine.

"Not looking too bad yourself," George had said back.

It was hard to focus on the vows and the little, ceremonious actions of slipping on rings and saying *I do* over and over as all he wanted to do was kiss his *husband* (holy shit, he'd never get used to that) and run down that aisle hand in hand.

"You may now kiss the-" there's a pause as the pastor likely didn't know what to say as he must be used to saying *you may now kiss the bride*. There's a small chuckle from the audience as the pastor clears his throat and tries again. "You may now kiss."

And oh God, he does.

"There's no mistletoe above our heads," Clay mumbled against George's lips, "but I'll kiss you anyway."

He felt George's hands on his shoulders and the smile against his lips before they kissed, a little more passionately than they probably should've, but Clay could hear his sister whooping and Alex shouting *geez, save it for the bedroom* that Clay reminded himself to kill him for later.

But as the kiss broke, and Clay held George's face in his hands, he broke into the biggest smile he'd maybe ever smiled.

The rest of the ceremony flew by with flying colors. Clay tucked a blue flower behind George's ear and George stuck a white rose behind Clay's, and Nick's toast was incredibly, *incredibly* embarrassing but also so heartfelt that nearly everyone was in tears by the end of it.

In fact, it started with "*I can't believe I walked in on these two having sex*" to which George actually shouted "that's not true, I swear!" to attempt to calm the absolute look of horror on his mother's face. But the speech ended with "*I love you, guys, and I know you'll love each other forever.*"

They probably got home around three in the morning, both extremely drunk off of champagne and lovesickness, stumbling through their dark, messy apartment and kissing and giggling and laughing until they tumbled on their unmade bed. The flower fell out of George's hair but Clay replaced it as he looked down at his husband, his *husband*, in the dim light of the stars.

"So, we're married now," Clay says, flopping down on top of him with such force it made George groan a little, but they were both comfortable like this. "What now?"

"We conquer the world," George says absently. They had barely kicked their shoes off and still were wearing the suits they got married in. "What else?"

"Yeah, you're right."

They looked at each other for a long time, and Clay tangled together their hands and relished in the feeling of their rings clinking together as he did so.

They ended up staying up the rest of the night for absolutely no reason, but just because they

could. Because George was drunk, he demanded that they danced because that's what he always did, and even though they had done a fair share of dancing (and drinking) at their wedding reception, there was never enough for drunk George.

They danced around in their pajamas at four in the morning, and George eventually made a game of stepping on Clay's feet to the point where Clay lifted him enough so that his feet just dragged on the floor.

"I revoke your dancing privileges," Clay had said. George didn't even protest. He nuzzled his head into Clay's neck and just held onto him.

"Tired?" Clay says into his hair, but he was yawning, too.

"No," George lies. "Carry me to bed, though. Wanna cuddle."

Clay laughs. "Wow, so demanding. Can't I get a 'thank you'?"

"Mmf," George replied.

They ended up having to close the blinds to go to sleep, because the colors of pink and orange from the rising sun were too bright to fall asleep to, and even though it was a little warm under all the blankets and cuddles and kisses, neither cared enough to move.

"Love you," Clay murmurs against George's forehead, pressing a kiss there. Then to his cheek, and then briefly to his lips.

"I know," George mutters, eyes closed but lips upturned in a cocky smile.

"Say it back," Clay mumbles.

"I love you," George whispers, hugging Clay closer to him by the middle.

"I know," Clay says.

And he did.

Clay loved George, and George loved Clay.

And that was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

I'm honestly so so sad that this is the end of this series, but I hope you guys enjoyed it! I couldn't have done it without all of your comments and support!

I have already uploaded two new chapters of one work and one new chapter of another, so please check that out! Just know that "The Us Against The World" will have most of my attention, and I will be working on updating that one at least once (maybe twice) a week. I'll let you guys know if I have an updating schedule.

I love you all! Thank you for sticking with me.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!